# When You Write a Letter

*Some Suggestions as to Why, When, and How It Should Be Done*

BY

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*To my former students and*
*all others who have not*
*answered my letters*

# PREFACE

Everybody writes letters, but not everybody does it well. The ability to write a good letter couched in effective language and put into correct form upon appropriate stationery constitutes a tremendous business, political, and social asset. This little book does not guarantee to make you perfect in these details, but it does undertake to interest you and to offer you distinct help.

THOMAS ARKLE CLARK

*Urbana, Illinois*
*August 1, 1921*

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# LETTER-WRITING

# LETTER-WRITING

This little volume is not to be a text-book; it is not even to be a "Ready Letter Writer" with illustrations of how to present an offer of marriage to a young woman, how to get a kitchen range from a mail-order house, or how to compose a letter that will have "pull" and get the big business. It is simply a friendly suggestive personal talk between you and me on the subject of writing letters of all sorts, good form and its importance, the effect of the unexpected, and the latent social and business possibilities of the art. I am going to tell you, in a very personal way, some of the things I have learned through thirty years of experience and observation in writing social and friendly and business letters to all sorts of men, in trying to teach high school students and college undergraduates how to write acceptable letters, and in waiting for months and years for the letter which was expected but which never came.

There was a time, not far beyond the memory of some who are still living, when letter-writing was a very precise art, prac-

ticed with scrupulous care and at long intervals, and demanding discriminating thought. Even in my own childhood, which is not a very remote period as history goes, I recall that the writing of a letter was not a task to be undertaken lightly, or accomplished without considerable serious preparation. It was analogous to preparing for threshers or getting ready to entertain the minister; all the family had a part in it and no one was allowed to shirk his duty.

Once a year a letter was written to our relatives in northern England. This letter was carefully, thoughtfully, and, I might almost say, prayerfully done. There were no misspellings of "received" or "accommodate," no sentences without subjects or verbs, no constructions whose grammatical parentage was in question, no careless illegible penmanship, no omission of vital and necessary details. The writing was like copper plate, the items of news were sifted and carefully thought out. Even though my father, who did the writing, had had little formal training in the subtle art of composition, this letter would have borne the cold scrutiny of a

doctor of philosophy teaching freshman composition in college. I think father would have been given an A. The reply which came six months later was equally irreproachable, and had been the subject of equal care by our English relatives.

One has only to read the books written a century or more ago to see how great a part letter-writing played in the best literature extant. The shelves of our libraries are full of illustrations of the fact that many great writers have done some of their best work in the letters written to their friends. Richardson's first novel—the first work in English, in fact, to be worthy of the name of novel—was a series of letters written in the stiff formal style of the eighteenth century. Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son can scarcely be matched in the essays of any great writer of his time, for their delightful refined literary style, their keen insight into human nature, their truthful depicting of the thought and customs of the day. In our own time the letters of Robert Louis Stevenson are as representative of that writer's charm and genius as anything else that he has written, and many another

modern writer has shown how effective informal letters can be.

In the olden days letter-writing was not so commonly practiced as now. Relatively few letters were written, and these few were not done thoughtlessly. There were good reasons for this. The cost of sending letters was excessive, and economy was of necessity practiced more rigidly than now; a dollar was seldom spent without deliberation. The writing and sending of a letter was a matter to be weighed carefully before it should be undertaken. To get a letter was a great event to be looked forward to with interest and pleasure and to be remembered and spoken of to the neighbors long afterward. Letters were passed around from one person to another and regarded with a respect and a consideration which we today, whose mail is crowded with all sorts of communications, can hardly understand.

I recall a story which my mother used to tell of the time in England when the postage used to be paid upon the receipt of the letter. A shrewd servant girl and her brother, both very poor, devised the scheme of sending communications to each

other through certain hieroglyphics drawn upon the envelope, which supposedly contained the letter which one had written to the other. When either received this letter from the hand of the postman, he looked at it for a moment, deciphered the message upon the outside, and then gave it back, with the statement that, though he would like very much to get the letter, the postage demanded was beyond his means. It was such practices as just described, it is said, that led Rowland Hill to work for penny postage in England.

Changing business and social conditions, the reduction of postage, inventions, the introduction of stenography and typewriting have revolutionized letter-writing and in many ways have taken away from it its charm and its personal flavor. Now every one writes letters and every one gets them. We write letters as thoughtlessly and as carelessly as we use the telephone or go to the movies. It makes as little impression on us to get a letter as it does to see an automobile or an airplane. The morning mail brings me communications from wash women asking me to help them collect their bills, and from college presidents

inquiring how to eliminate hazing, or to discourage Theta Nu Epsilon, and one has in it about as much individuality as the other. Usually both of them are typewritten, for the college president has a stenographer and the laundress has a daughter in high school who uses a typewriter.

We write ten letters now where we wrote one fifty years ago. It is the way we do business, it is the way we keep in touch with our friends, and perform our social obligations. Ultimately we shall pay a social call by writing a letter. Perhaps we shall hear our sermons by correspondence. But the increase in the number of letters we write has not improved our epistolary style; it has on the contrary made our writing more mechanical, less intimate, less personal and individual. If we have a stenographer she assumes all responsibility for our spelling, our punctuation, our sentence structure, and in fact for everything else excepting the bald business facts which our letters contain.

"How do you spell 'ammonia'?" I heard one of his employees ask a business man not long ago.

"I don't know anything about spelling or grammar," was his reply. "That's my stenographer's business. I simply tell her what to say and she fixes it up all right." I had had enough letters from him, however, to know that his stenographer was quite as deeply immersed in orthographic and grammatical darkness as was he himself, and that he was blissfully in ignorance of the fact.

Stenography has done a great deal to facilitate and accelerate letter-writing, but in many ways it has injured and cheapened the art. Very few men dictate as they talk. They fall into a conventional mechanical style, often verbose, and usually abrupt and lacking in grace and rhythm. It is pretty hard to talk cleverly into a dictaphone or to extemporize mellifluous phrases to a man fingering a stenotype. Some men can give a personal human touch to a dictated letter, but the number is limited. Dictated letters are infrequently planned with much care, and such a letter usually contains more words and says less than a letter written by hand. The limitations of time in writing a letter in longhand give opportunity for thought

and discrimination in the choice of words and induces brevity and directness of expression. One has not time to say as much when writing longhand as when dictating, and so chooses his phrases and his ideas more carefully, plans his ideas more thoughtfully, and says more effectively what he has to say.

I was to make an after-dinner speech not long ago, and while I was dressing, my wife, who is naturally interested in my postprandial success, asked,

"What are you going to say tonight?"

"I haven't the least idea," I replied truthfully, trusting in Providence, as most men do in such a situation, that something clever would come into my mind at the last minute.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed, with a sort of hopeless note in her voice, "you'll talk a long time then." And it is as true of writing as it is of speech that the man who makes no preparation, who "takes his pen in hand" with no definite plan in his mind when he begins to write is likely to wander on for a long time without getting anywhere.

I think we all realize the possibilities of

letter writing as a business asset, but perhaps only when immediate business is in sight. In a moment of thoughtlessness I confided in a friend not long ago my intention shortly to buy a motor car. He, lacking something to talk about, disclosed the information to a second friend, who had a connection with the automobile business. Then the news spread, and at once my mail became heavy with letters. Most of these were circular letters devised cunningly to imitate typewriting, and so phrased as to seem like a personal appeal to me; but the disguise was thin and most of them went into the wastepaper basket without my even reading them to the end. I hate the multigraphed letter—it never deceives even an infant. I feel about it as I do when an acquaintance says to me, "Drop around and take dinner with us any time." His invitation has nothing personal or definite in it and is not one I should think of accepting. It makes no intimate appeal.

One of the letters, however, did interest me because it was personal, and it came from a man who had previously shown some interest in me. He had written me

once when I was ill or had performed some service that had attracted his attention, a letter he was in no way under obligation to write; he had done so purely from courtesy. The letter that he wrote me this time was not a stock letter, but one that recognized me as an individual with some personal idiosyncrasies, with needs and tastes different from those of other individuals. I replied to his letter, and there is every indication that I shall buy his car, and I hold that in writing me the courteous, unsolicited, and unselfish note when he had no business axe to grind he played his business cards with the greatest finesse. He had my ear at once when he wanted to do business with me. He had learned, as many business men have not, I am sorry to say, that there are many letters besides the purely business letter that ultimately get a good deal of business.

As I write this last sentence there comes to my mind a little Italian fruit-vender that drifted across my domestic horizon a few years ago, who had in some subtle way learned the effectiveness of the courteous note in business relationships.

His real name was Sam, but we named

him "Cucus" because when he first arrived from his birthplace in southern Italy and began his daily round with his pushcart delivering fruit and vegetables at our back door, he had his own difficulties with our unmusical language and announced the early green cucumbers as "cucus."

His honesty, his soft, pleasant voice, and his ingratiating manners won trade for him, and it was not long until he was driving a wagon of his own with his name painted in gold along the side. He learned gradually to speak a little better, and at night school he learned to write a very round and very readable hand, though his orthography, his diction, and his punctuation retained some original touches, a condition not in any sense unique.

He had his own troubles, too, as other business men have had, and sometimes he told them confidentially to me. His consignments of fruit were not always good, he could not always dispose of his stock before it became stale, and sometimes landladies did not pay him or unregenerate students imposed upon him and gave him bad checks. It was about such a check that he spoke to me. Cucus was out

eight dollars which he could ill afford to lose. He had somehow developed a feeling that I need but say the word and any recreant undergraduate would immediately come to time. When he had told me his story, I found that his was not a difficult matter of adjustment. I agreed to manage it for him, received his gracious thanks and a handful of fresh carrots, attended to the little business the next day, and forgot about it.

A few days later I found a note from him in my morning mail. The spelling is his own; the "Urbanana" probably an echo of his favorite morning announcement at our back door.

Champaign, Illinois.

Oct. 18 - 1916

Mr. Thomas Arkel Clark
University of Illinois
Urbanana, Illinois

My dear Mr. Clarke

I droped you this few lines to let you know that Mr Devine paid me today so I have get my money from him. I am thank you very much, and I remain your very sincery freind

Sam

I held the letter in my hand a long time, thinking. I do business mostly with cultivated, educated people; I wish they were all as thoughtful and courteous as this Italian fruit-vender. He had already learned something of the personal touch in business through letter-writing.

It is curious how many letters are never acknowledged or answered in any way, and yet every letter, and especially every letter that has in it anything of the personal element, is entitled to a reply of some sort. Every day as part of the routine of my office I am writing to the fathers of various young men who are registered as undergraduates in college. These letters are personal and direct, and they show a knowledge and an interest in the individual with whom they are concerned. But, strangely enough, very few of them are ever acknowledged, or, if they are acknowledged, it is quite often the mother rather than the father who replies.

"Mr. Jones received your letter," she writes, "and being a very busy man he has asked me to reply"—then follow many pages of explanation and appreciation. It has always been a matter of interest and

wonderment to me how these busy men with stenographers at their call, usually, find so little time to give to the affairs of their sons, while their wives apparently have nothing else to do but write. I have just been talking over the long distance telephone with a prominent and successful business man to whom, within the last three months, I have written twice about his son. He answered neither of my letters, he explained to me, because he first wanted to see how the boy would respond to the advice he had written him upon the receipt of my first letter. His method, however, did not encourage me very strongly to continue my efforts.

The general tendency is to reply only to letters that are a matter of self-interest or self-advantage. If a reply brings me no profit or pleasure, why make it? If I owe Jones and, for one reason or another, have delayed in meeting my obligation, I hear from him quickly and often; if he owes me and I write him, the mail service is usually pretty slow if it does not cease entirely. It has been my misfortune for a considerable number of years to be indirectly responsible for the collection of va-

rious sums of money—subscriptions to certain funds, fraternity and sorority notes, loans due the University from graduates who were given financial help while they were in college. I have written some of these delinquents twice a year for seventeen years without getting a reply. If I happened to meet one of them and the matter of his obligation came up, I asked:

"Why did you not reply to any of the letters I wrote you?"

"Well," he would say, quite without shame, "I didn't have the money; so what was the use of wasting my time and a postage stamp in saying so?"

He seemed never to realize that an explanation of his delay and his delinquency was due me.

It is always a satisfaction to get a gracious reply to a letter. Even when I am convinced that some of the statements contained are exaggerations, and that the promises may never be fulfilled, I am pleased as was a wealthy friend of mine who confessed to me once that he enjoyed flattery, only "it must not be crudely done."

If I write a letter, as I often must, to

the father of a former student asking for the present address of the young man, I may wait for weeks before receiving a reply, and quite as often as not I shall never get one. If, however, in writing, I say that I find that he is entitled to a certain rebate, or that it would be to his scholastic advantage if I can hear from him, the reply is sure to come immediately. Self-interest seems to be the strongest motive to induce people to answer letters.

Why do not people answer letters? Often it is carelessness or laziness. They mean to, or at least they say to themselves that they do, but they delay, as sinners delay joining church. Ultimately the letter is lost and they forget all about it. They inveigle themselves into believing that they haven't the time, as a freshman at seven forty-five in the morning persuades himself that he can still snatch ten minutes of sleep and get to an eight o'clock class. They are indifferent or ignorant.

"I have not had a reply from Mr. Rice whom you gave as reference," I say to a junior who has applied for a loan from one of the college loan funds, "do you have any idea why?"

"Well, Mr. Rice is a very busy man," is his explanation, "and I suppose he has not yet got around to it."

But in reality the fact that he is busy is usually the last reason why a man does not reply to a letter. The really busy man must have system or his work piles up. He clears his desk daily knowing that new duties and obligations will be upon him tomorrow. I write to such a man on Monday and by Wednesday morning I have his reply. He has no time to waste in useless temporizing and delay. The busy man decides things at once and gets them done; it is the lazy man and the loafer and the procrastinator whom one never hears from, and the man who has no regular system of doing things.

Not long ago I published a brief article on the subject of acknowledging letters, especially letters of sympathy and congratulation. Any number of people to whom I had at one time or another written such a letter called me up or spoke to me, or wrote me about the matter, and the tenor of their communications was that it had never occurred to them that such a letter required an acknowledgment. One

boy wrote, "I was very much ashamed of myself when I read your little essay in Sunday morning's paper and remembered that when you wrote me last summer I made no acknowledgment of your thoughtfulness. Worse than that, I did not realize that I should have done so. It did not occur to me that a reply to your letter which gave to me and to my parents so much pleasure and satisfaction was required, and that it might possibly have made you feel as happy as your letter made me. I think many people are probably as ignorant of this subject as I was, for no one has ever before called my attention to my duty in such a case. I assure you I shall not offend in the future." Very few letters but are entitled to an acknowledgment of some sort. It leaves a good taste in a body's mouth to receive a reply to a letter he has written, no matter how trifling the business is with which it is concerned.

If letters are to be answered at all, they should be answered promptly, excepting perhaps friendly letters, where there is ordinarily a sort of understanding between friends that a reasonable number of days

or weeks or months shall intervene between the exchange of communications. One of the dearest friends I have, from whom I am separated by a thousand miles, writes to me and I to him once a year. Neither expects more than this, and each looks forward to the annual letter with interest and pleasure. Ordinarily, however, a letter should be answered at once.

I heard a man say not long ago, a man, too, whose correspondence is large, that he regularly delayed answering letters because if one delayed he would find that many letters really answered themselves and so did not require a written reply. I was interested to note, however, that the top of his desk was always in a litter, that he could never find anything that he wanted, and that his drawers, when he opened them furtively, were crowded with a jumbled mess of papers. People complained often, also, that their communications to him were ignored, that their requests received no attention, and that his official business was in more or less of a tangle. He paid rather dearly, I am convinced, as every man does for delay and neglect in his correspondence.

## LETTER-WRITING

People sometimes do not reply to letters because they are at a loss to know what to say. This is especially true of letters of congratulation and condolence. Something ought to be said, but what? The situation is similar to speaking to an acquaintance or a friend who has just lost a very near member of his household. We are so afraid of saying the wrong thing that we say nothing. In either case if we would only give expression in as direct and simple a way as possible to what we feel, we should have done a gracious thing and should have brought pleasure or comfort to one of our friends. It does not quite so much matter what we say as that we say something that genuinely expresses our feelings or our obligations.

Most of our reasons for not answering letters are selfish ones. We see no personal profit in it; to do so would take time and thought, and these, we argue, we can not afford, not recognizing the fact that whatever a man really wants to do he will by hook or crook find an opportunity to do.

The writing of letters is very much a matter of temperament. Not every one,

because of lack of experience or facility in the use of written language, has learned fully to put his own personality into his letters, but there are very few who do not in some way reveal their personal characteristics through their letters. Men because of their more general training and experience in business are briefer in their letters, more direct, less emotional, more practical. They get to their point more quickly and are often quite barren of details and so lacking in interest. Their communications are like the small boy's diary at sea. "Rained," he says laconically in recounting the events of one day, and the next, "Rained some more," and that for him is the end of the story, being all that happened and all that he has to say.

Women, on the other hand, are not so easily stopped. It is an unusual woman who can get to a simple point in less than four pages; often it requires eight, and then one is sometimes forced to re-read the letter to satisfy one's self as to what the point is. When a father makes inquiry of me as to how his son is getting on in college he usually gets the question out of his system in from four to six lines.

When I get such a letter from a mother the communication and the inquiry are generally accompanied with harrowing details of infantile disasters, which had undermined his health and made it difficult or impossible for him to do good work. There are accounts of his difficulties in teething, of the size and influence of his tonsils and adenoids, of the various physical struggles through which he has passed, and which have all but wrecked him. There is the assurance always that if I could only appreciate his many virtues, how hard he has worked, how much he and all his family have worried about his mental progress, I should be more than ordinarily interested in him. And what she really wants to know is what chance he has of continuing in college, but she does not get at that without many and devious preliminary peregrinations.

I have before me now, from a woman, a letter which runs to two thousand words or more. It discusses in much incoherent detail various difficulties which she has had with her tenants, with her neighbors, and with a woman to whom she thought she had rented her house. I have read it over

several times, and I have asked a number of my friends to do so, and together we have concluded that what she really wants is to ask me if I should be willing to speak at a parents' association at some not distant date.

Now these women to whom I refer are not illiterate women. Many of them have been to college. Some of them have been teachers, and the one to whom I have last referred is the wife of an educated man, and was herself for several years a teacher. If there is a reason for this curious prolixity in their written speech, it lies, I suppose, in the fact that most women have had little actual contact with business. They are unfamiliar with business methods; they do not approach a subject directly; they are given to complicated explanations.

It is never wise to use sarcasm or to show anger in a letter. The words that are spoken in a passion become blurred and faded with time; their sharpness is dulled as other events intervene, and ultimately we may forget them altogether, but the written word eats into our memory and galls us more and more as time goes

on. If we try to forget it, there is still the written page to turn to, and the wound which is caused at first is reopened. Sarcasm always inflames; it is a cruel weapon against which, with many people, there is little or no defense. It sometimes brings the desired result for the moment, but it is likely to cause a permanent feud between the two people concerned in the correspondence. Men are thicker skinned than women and do not take this sort of attack quite so seriously as women do, but even men seldom quite forget the sarcastic slam in a letter. Women never forget it and never quite forgive it. When you have written a woman a sarcastic letter you might as well bring yourself to the conclusion that in the future all diplomatic relations between the two of you will cease. She will never see you without recalling your words; she will have it in for you as long as you live.

It is generally a weak and cowardly thing to write a sarcastic, angry letter. It is seldom if ever justified excepting to stimulate the stolid. It is cowardly because there is often so little "comeback"; it is not a fair open fight. On the surface

sarcasm is harmless, without evil intention or guile, but concealed within it is the deadly poison and the sting. It is really meant to hurt. It is weak to show anger because the angry man has for the moment lost control of himself; he admits that he has not the physical strength of self-mastery and such weakness is ordinarily pitiable. The angry man must ultimately apologize for his weakness or leave himself permanently in a bad light, and he is often too weak to apologize.

Not long ago a young sophomore brought me a letter which he had just received from his father. The boy had failed in a part of his college work, and a notice of the fact had gone to the father, who received it, I presume, in his morning mail. The disappointment and the disgrace of it angered him, for he knew that the boy was quite capable of doing his work well, and he yielded weakly to the impulse of the moment and wrote his son and mailed the letter without reading it, perhaps, and certainly without giving any considerate thought to what he had written. It was a cruel, scathing letter that any father should have been ashamed

to write, and it cut the boy like a knife. The boy will never quite forget it, especially since the father who no doubt regretted his action as soon as he had had a little while to come to himself, never could quite bring himself in so many words to say so. And the gap gradually widened between the two.

Every one has a tendency to write letters when he is angry; in fact, I am sure I do my cleverest work under such circumstances. Feeling stimulates the imagination, and so for the time being adds force and effectiveness to the style. When I write such a letter, I always read it over with an appreciation of its ironical subtleness, of its careful phrasing, of its stinging effects, and I admit generally that it is a corking good piece of work that will bring the recipient to his senses. And then before signing it I lay it away until the next day. Next morning when I come into my office after a good night's rest I read the letter again and laugh, and admit to myself how well done it is, and then I tear it up and drop it carefully into the waste-paper basket and write another—much less clever, no doubt, not so well phrased,

perhaps, but quite logical, quite free from malice and anger. It is a plan which has worked well for me and one that I submit for the sympathetic consideration of others. It gives me all the exhilaration and satisfaction of writing a letter that takes the skin off, and I am never humiliated by having to apologize for having done a thoughtless or ungentlemanly thing.

A letter of apology is a very difficult letter to write, and it is seldom done well. The most of such letters as I have seen have been done awkwardly, haltingly, with little genuineness and finesse. I presume the reason is that we write them because we ought to do it and not because we want to do it. Our parents or our wives or the Dean insists that it be done, and we yield with reservations. An acquaintance of mine has been waiting for weeks, I am convinced, in an attempt to get up his courage to write me a letter of apology for an asinine thing he said to me, but he isn't quite up to it. The letter will come in time, but it will be badly done; it will be an attempt to justify himself rather than a real apology; he will

try to explain why he was a fool; it would be just as well if he did not write the letter, for a badly made apology is like a left-handed compliment. I recall such a one. A group of young people were "ragging" me when I was a boy on the too generous outlines of my mouth. Since nothing hurts so badly as the truth, their remarks were teasing me not a little. A kind old lady sitting by, hoping to mitigate their insults and to placate my wounded feelings, said, patting me gently on the arm, "Never mind what they are saying, I've seen bigger mouths than yours." It is true that she was a woman who had seen a good deal of the world, but it was always a query in my mind whether or not she had exaggerated to cheer me up.

It takes a generous spirit to make a good apology. There should be no holding back. If you have been wrong, you should admit it without alibi or reservation. To do otherwise is simply to add to the original insult. It is not necessary to say much; one should say nothing unless it be sincere and genuine and comes from the heart.

"I made a fool of myself in your office

the other day," a boy wrote me—he really used a qualifying word before "fool" which I omit for the sake of appearances—"and I'm sorry. I hope the memory of the incident has not given you as much pain as it has given me. If you can overlook my discourtesy, I assure you that I shall not be guilty again. The fault was entirely mine." Nothing more needed to be said.

It is seldom safe to joke in a letter excepting with very intimate friends who know one's personal idiosyncrasies and mental habits. A joke is based most frequently upon exaggeration or upon an unexpected turn in the use of words or some deformity of speech, and we are looking for none of these in a letter from a stranger and seldom know what to make of them when we come across them in his letter. The effectiveness of humor depends so much more often than we think upon the unexpected emphasis we place upon words, upon the glance of the eye, the raising of the eyebrows, the intonation of the voice, the momentary hesitation before the last word. One may have all these in mind when he is writing a letter, but they are absent when the letter is read, and

there is nothing left usually but the bald, cold statement of facts bared of all its subtleties and suggestiveness. I have so often been misunderstood when I have tried to be funny or have unconsciously been so in a letter, that I have given it up. I remember writing to a father once and saying to him that he gave his son such a generous monthly allowance that it required all the boy's time to spend it and left him no opportunity to devote any attention to his studies. The father came back at me very seriously by demonstrating conclusively that with the experience his son had previously had he could easily spend all his allowance in half the time at his disposal. I have never been sure which of us misunderstood the other. Now, however, I either omit jokes from my general correspondence or tie a label to them. It is too great a risk to let them go uncatalogued.

The business and social and diplomatic possibilities of writing letters are infinite. It is a process by which we make and keep our friends, or increase our business, or widen our influence. By it we can hold people's attention, or awaken their inter-

est, or change their conduct. We can make them happy, or drive them to despair. I had a letter only recently from an old friend of mine whom I had not seen or heard from since we were boys of eighteen. He had stumbled upon my name and picture in a magazine, and these had recalled to him, as his letter recalled to me, all our boyhood relationships. His letter brought back to me my youth with all the friends I had known, all the escapades of which I had been a part, all the subtle influences which had combined to form my character. The few sentences of his letter spread out before me again the whole panorama of my youth. A letter I received thirty-five years ago or more —a very commonplace letter it might have seemed to a casual reader—changed my whole future. It made me give up the work I was then engaged in and drove me to college. It stimulated me to study and gave me an ambition to see the world.

Writing letters is something more than merely putting one word after another upon paper. It is an art, and an art almost universally employed, which is well worth our study. To write letters well we must

realize something of the effect of appearance and form as men and women must know the same thing if they are to dress becomingly. Since I have been writing these paragraphs I have seen a beautiful letter of condolence which came far short of its possibilities simply because it was written on the wrong sort of paper, and folded badly, and followed a crude form, and it fell still farther short of what it should have accomplished because it was written by an educated man who should have known better how to dress up his thoughts—and who was disappointing because he did it so badly. His letter was like a man going to a formal party in overalls.

The successful writing of letters is largely a matter of psychology. No two people are affected in quite the same way; what will be pleasing or compelling in one case will irritate or have little effect in another. We should study the individual. The form letter makes this individual study difficult or impossible. It is meant to apply to all cases. It must be like a proprietary medicine, compounded of such a variety of drugs as to

have some curative effect upon any disease to which it may be applied. It is a panacea for anything from measles to ingrowing toenails.

The writing of letters, as I have before suggested, must have some regard for the "time and the seasons." You cannot properly acknowledge the receipt of a Christmas present in July or express your appreciation of an act of courtesy shown you by a friend six months after the act has occurred. One of the greatest difficulties we all meet in writing letters is in finding the time to do it when it should be done. If Smith is elected to office and I wish to congratulate him, I must do it at once; if I owe Brown and cannot pay him at the time agreed upon, I must let him know before the loan is past due. Most letters should have attention on a definite day, or the critical or effective moment is gone for good.

I have always been sorry that I did not write Frank Barry when he lost his oldest son. We had been friends since our boyhood, and I knew that he would have been glad to hear from me. I was crowded with work at the time, however; I meant to do

it, and then it went out of my mind until it would have been an insult rather than a courtesy for me to mention the matter to him in a letter. My chance was gone forever.

One is helped very much in meeting this situation of doing the thing on time by having a convenient place in which to write letters, with a proper assortment of materials at hand. A fountain pen, a box of stationery, and a convenient desk or armchair in a quiet corner are all conducive to promptness in this regard. There are leisure moments before breakfast sometimes, or after dinner, when if everything is within reach it is little trouble to write a letter. I have always felt about letter-writing as I do about reading. I know that if I have an attractive book on the table near which I sit or lie stretched out upon a couch when I am waiting for meals or resting for a little while at the end of the day, I am sure to reach for it, and, before I know it, I am well under way. Before many days the book is finished and I am ready for another. In the same way I write letters.

It is the unexpected letter that most

often brings pleasure. I run through the morning mail sometimes before the office boy lays it opened upon my desk. I know before the letters are opened what most of them will contain. They are letters in reply to mine of a few days before; letters of inquiry, of complaint, or of solicitation; letters from relatives or friends who write me regularly. But once in a while I find a surprise in the mail. Buxton, from whom I haven't heard for years, writes me from Shreveport, or Baker from New Orleans, or Noone from far away Cilicia and has something pleasant or complimentary to say to me. The whole day is brighter because of the unexpected pleasure the letter gave me, and I make up my mind that I, too, will write letters even when I am not under obligations to do so, because in so doing I may make some one happy, or I may hold or gain a friend.

There are various sorts of letters, each making its own exactions and each subject to its own particular conventions. A little knowledge of form, a directness, a frank sincerity, a regard for the interests and feelings of others, and a certain in-

sight into human nature, are about all that is required to write a good letter. If you have these, the result will surprise you and will be worth infinitely more than the effort it costs.

# MATERIALS AND FORM

# MATERIALS AND FORM

Every morning as I look through the pile of letters that the office boy places on my desk, I am impressed with the disregard which the writers have had of established conventions, of form and arrangement, of proper materials, of some of the most essential details of a correct letter. My correspondence is not conducted to any extent with illiterate or uneducated people, but in most instances with people of more than average training and experience —high school graduates, teachers, college officials, city business men, and men of affairs. And yet I find curious inconsistencies, sentences without verbs or subjects, and words of the most weird orthography. The letters are often without margins or paragraphs, and are written upon paper of no particular size or style; high school boys and even teachers sometimes using ragged sheets torn from a notebook or paper that in no way fits the envelope. Many of the letters are not dated, and others contain an insufficient address; should I desire to reply I am compelled to hunt through my files for

an address. Women more often than men are guilty of this last fault, of omitting from the letter itself all indication of the specific address of the writer, and if they live in Chicago or some other large city the probability of such omission seems to become still greater. Usually, in such cases, if I will go into my outer office and stand on my head and paw about for a while in the waste paper basket where my clerk has thrown the envelopes containing the morning mail, I shall find an envelope on the front of which, or more often on the back, will be the address which should have been also in the letter itself. Ladies are most given to this error of writing their address on the back of the envelope only, never realizing that most business men never see the envelopes in which their letters come. Some men as well fall into it. Little discrimination is used as to complimentary beginnings and endings, "Very truly" and "Very sincerely" are used so indiscriminately that it is not possible by glancing at the letter to guess whether it has to do with strictly business matters or is a friendly letter of courtesy. Most of my correspondents as

well as yours have been taught a good deal about these and other details of form, but they have not considered them seriously or made them a part of their own daily habits.

A newspaper always gives particular attention to the make-up of its front page, because that is what first catches the eye. First impressions are frequently the most lasting ones. A pretty girl is even more attractive if she is well dressed, and a good dinner is made an excellent one if the table is tastefully arranged and the courses are carefully served. So a letter is presented in the most effective way only if the materials upon which it is written are carefully chosen, and the form into which it is thrown is well considered.

I still recall with vividness the pleasure I felt a few years ago on receiving a little note from Mr. Irving Bacheller. The stationery was distinctive, and I have no doubt was a sort regularly used by him throughout many years. The penmanship was beautiful and looked almost as if each letter had been made separately as one would devise ornamental script. The margins were wide, almost mathematically

even, and occupied quite half of the page. There were only two or three sentences in the entire letter, running down the middle of the page, but it gave me the lasting impression of careful arrangement, of fitness, and of perfect form. I have always wanted to write such a letter.

There are those who say that in a business letter at least it is only the facts presented which count. It amounts to little, they assert, whether you use green paper or yellow, whether "occurred" is spelled with one or two r's, whether the sentences contain verbs or limp along with participles, just so what is said can be understood. I do not believe this. I feel sure that even though the reader is not consciously affected by it, a slovenly, badly arranged, illiterate letter will fall short in its effect even upon the uncritical reader who is not trained consciously to recognize these weaknesses.

The materials used in writing a letter should, when possible, be in keeping with the character of the letter, and should be the best the writer can afford. A considerable number of people, especially women and young folks, are not likely to have

any sort of business stationery; they do not do a great deal of business by correspondence. Such people need not be embarrassed if they conduct such business correspondence as they may have to do on the stationery which they ordinarily use for social purposes. The business or professional man will have paper and envelopes especially printed or engraved for his business correspondence. A brief clear statement of his name and business or the name of his firm, with a definite unmistakable address, is, barring the date line or the telephone number, all that need be given. I often spend time in trying to decipher from the mass of material which is crowded into a letterhead just where to address the man whose name is subscribed to the epistle, and often the best I can do is to hazard a guess. The less detail a business letterhead has printed on it and the more modest the display, the more effectively, I am convinced, it will serve its purpose. I struggled through a complicated elaborately designed letterhead a few days ago during my morning dictation. I spent several minutes in analyzing it, and yet I am not at all sure

that I addressed my letter to the place where it should have gone.

The size of paper for business correspondence is usually eleven by eight and one-half inches, or it may be half this size or somewhat more than half. On the smaller sheets the letterhead may be printed either the short or the long way of the paper. It is quite safe if the color of the paper is white, though many people consciously choose rather striking colors, such as brown or yellow or blue, for distinctiveness and do so with good effect. When a given color or size of paper is once adopted, if it has any character, it should not be changed, for it will become in time a sort of trade-mark or sign of identification of the individual or of the firm. A successful business man whom I know has for years used a warm brown stationery printed in an ink of still darker brown, which gives an individual effect. I never see the color but it brings to mind his firm. It is to me one of his best advertising assets, and one which it would be a distinct mistake for him to change.

Envelopes should be of the same quality of paper as the letter sheets used, and

should be of a size easily to admit the folded sheets which they are to contain. Nothing is more exasperating than to find envelopes too short or too narrow to contain the folded letter, and nothing makes a sloppier looking letter than one turned up at the ends or folded into some unconventional shape and squeezed into a tight little envelope.

A sheet eight and one-half by eleven inches should be folded three times—first from the bottom of the sheet up as the sheet lies flat, leaving the under edge a trifle longer than the upper so that the letter may be opened easily when it is in the hands of the reader. The second fold should be from the left to the right, turning over slightly less than one-third of the double folded sheet. The third fold should be from the right to the left in a manner similar to the way in which the second fold was made. When completely folded the letter will be about three by five and one-half inches. There is no other way correctly to fold such a sheet. The smaller sheet mentioned above should be folded twice—from the left to the right and from the right to the left, and the

envelope used should be of the proper size to admit it easily. Sometimes a sheet eight and a half by seven and a quarter inches is used, but in such a case the envelopes should be seven and a half inches long. Otherwise the sheet will need to be folded up an inch or two from the bottom, a procedure which does not make a neat-looking letter. Such stationery as I have described with a business letterhead printed at the top is for business purposes only. It should not ordinarily be employed for social correspondence excepting, perhaps, between men who know each other well, and who are willing for the time being to ignore social conventions. The better you know people the more liberties you can take in correspondence.

Stationery for friendly or social correspondence varies considerably in size. Women often use small folded sheets or correspondence cards about three and one-half by five and one-half inches. A standard size of paper is approximately seven and a quarter by ten and a half inches. This may be used as single sheets, in which case it is folded twice to go into the envelope—from the bottom up and from the

top down, and the size of the envelope in this case is four by seven and a half inches; or it may be folded into a double sheet five and a quarter by seven and a quarter inches, in which case the envelope is three and three-fourths by five and three-fourths inches. The single sheet eight and one-half by five and one-half inches which comes made up into blocks is not a good form to use. It suggests crude inexperience. No extreme shades will do for this sort of letter-writing, if one wishes to be thought to have good taste. White is the best, though soft shades of gray are permissible.

"Wonder what his correspondence is like?" Mrs. Cheveley asks of Lord Goring in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. And then as she looks at the letters, "Oh, what a very uninteresting correspondence! Who on earth writes to him on pink paper? How silly to write on pink paper! It looks like the beginning of a middle-class romance." It looks, in fact, in these days like a sentimental child of fourteen.

Many people never change the size or quality or shade of the paper on which they conduct their social correspondence. There is a certain individual personal touch

in this adhering to one style that appeals to me. It shows a definiteness of taste, a certain stability of character that I admire. One man to whom I have written for many years never varies in his correspondence from the use of a light cadet gray. I recognize the familiar shade the moment the postman deposits his package of letters upon my desk, and the color itself has come to have for me the suggestion of a personality which I enjoy.

I do not know how much can really be told of a man's character through an examination of his penmanship; personally I can tell but little, but I feel sure that I could venture a pretty accurate guess concerning many of his personal traits by examining the general form of his letters. A letter without a margin looks about as attractive as a book or magazine would under the same circumstances, or as a man without a collar, and if the margin is narrow or uneven the effect is not much better than it would be if there were none at all. There should always be a margin of three-quarters of an inch at least on the left side of the sheet.

Abbreviations are better omitted than

otherwise even in business letters. They generally show laziness or haste, and both of these are bad qualities to reveal in any sort of correspondence. They are employed sparingly or not at all now by business firms who pay any careful attention to good form and good appearance. The indentations for paragraphs should be even. The first word of each paragraph should be indented about the same distance as the width of the margin left or even farther than this, but these indentations, whatever they are, should be in a straight line drawn the length of the page. The letter given below will illustrate what I have in mind with reference to abbreviations and the indenting of paragraphs.

Urbana, Illinois
September 13, 1920

Mr. Ford E. Belt
Lyndon, Illinois

Dear Mr. Belt:

I would like to have you plan to work with a branch of our office during the registration days. It will be necessary for you to be present at a conference on Friday afternoon, September 17, with

Mr. A. J. Schuettner, and to register on Saturday afternoon, September 18.

I wish you would write to me at once as to whether or not you can be with us at that time. I must have a reply from you not later than Thursday, September 16.

Very truly yours,

Every one who writes should give at least a little attention to paragraphing. If the letter is written in longhand then the writer can manage this matter entirely as he wishes; if it is a dictated letter then the stenographer will need to exercise a little judgment in indicating by paragraphing when one topic ends and another one begins. A good many men who are careful as to their paragraph structure suggest to the stenographer as they are giving their dictation the beginnings and endings of paragraphs. The change of manner or the intonation of the voice is usually, however, sufficient indication to the stenographer. Some writers make almost every sentence of their letters into a separate paragraph, thinking that by this method they secure a greater emphasis. The real facts are that by so separating

their ideas they weaken their style and fail to secure emphasis at all. An entire typewritten page, on the other hand, without breaks, is jumbled and confusing. Such a page is less clear and definite than a broken page. Paragraphs in the ordinary letter should probably not exceed one hundred or one hundred and fifty words; otherwise the appearance is heavy.

There are conventional ways of beginning and closing all sorts of letters, and these we cannot ordinarily with safety deviate from materially. We are coming gradually to be more direct, less formal and more natural and human, perhaps, in the use of these forms, than we once were. Written speech has always been a little more studied, a little less natural than spoken. It is likely to continue so, I imagine, though the difference is gradually being minimized. Our grandfathers began their letters "Respected Sir and Friend" capitalizing everything in sight, and ended them, even when they had to do with the most trivial subjects discussed with the most ordinary readers, "Your Humble and Obedient Servant." We don't do it that way now; we seldom go so far

in these days as to sign ourselves "Respectfully yours," to any one.

Which leads me to say that a considerable number of people who have given indications in other directions at least of being intelligent sign their letters "Very *respectively* yours." How one could be "respectively" anyone's unless he were a firm or a board or a dual personality of some sort is too much for me to understand. It is not surprising, however, that high school boys and country storekeepers make the mistake when one runs onto it sometimes in the letters of college graduates.

The conventional beginnings and endings of letters, like all idioms, should seldom if ever be taken literally. When we say "How do you do?" to a friend as we pass him on the street we have no thought that he will halt and give us a detailed account of his mental and physical processes. It is in most cases purely a conventional form of recognition and greeting requiring no specific reply. So, too, when we begin a business letter with "Dear Sir" or a social one with "My dear Miss Jarvis," the recipients are not justi-

fied in feeling that either of these forms of address suggests any warmth of personal affection. One must begin some way, and these are simply the conventional forms which polite society approves, and which we are supposed to follow.

"How are ye this marnin', Mrs. McGinnis?" one Irishwoman greeted another over the back fence, "Not that I give a hang but just to start the talk." And in a similar manner, then, conventional beginnings and endings are simply to start and end the talk contained in letters.

A business letter addressed to a firm should begin "Gentlemen," or "Dear Sirs," or "My dear Sirs," the last being the most friendly. If addressing a business letter to an individual one may say "Dear Sir," "My dear Sir," or even "My dear Mr. Snyder." These forms are given in the order of their formality, the last one being the most friendly and the least formal, and a form which may very properly be used, which should be used, in fact, when men who are transacting business with each other are acquainted. If the two men are very close friends they may even in a business letter

address each other by their first names, as "My dear George." These complimentary beginnings excepting when they include proper names should in most cases have the first and last words only capitalized. Such a complimentary beginning is usually preceded by the name and address of the one to whom the letter is written, as in the following letter.

Ames, Iowa,
January 19, 1921.

Dean Thomas A. Clark,
Dean of Men,
University of Illinois,
Urbana, Illinois.

My dear Dean Clark:

In your letter to me in reply to certain questions asked, you made mention of the fact that you have a Student Council which I understand from your letter handles cases involving misdemeanors of various kinds. Would you be kind enough to send me one of your pamphlets setting forth the selection, organization, and work of the committee mentioned. I will appreciate it very greatly.

Very truly yours,

In the above letter, if it is thought best, the punctuation may be omitted from the ends of the lines. This method of punctuating is called the "open" method.

No one who has any knowledge of conventional forms now ever begins a letter "Sir," or "Mr. Jones," or "Friend Smith," or "Dear Friend." There is no special reason for this excepting that people who establish conventional forms do not do it, and one is considered "green" or inexperienced if he thus begins a letter.

The complimentary close of a business letter should be, "Truly yours," or "Yours truly," or "Very truly yours," or "Yours very truly," only the first word in any case being capitalized. Occasionally still we see, when an inferior officer is addressing a superior one, when a young man is writing to an old one, or when for any reason there is desire or cause for acknowledging or suggesting respect, the complimentary closing of a letter "Respectfully yours," or "Very respectfully yours." This ending is in good form only when the business relations between the persons are such as to inspire the feelings indicated by the word "respectfully," and this rela-

tion does not commonly occur. It is never permissible to close with "Yours" or any single word. The letter below, written by a junior in college is in about as bad form as could be devised by an intelligent person who had tried to think out all possible violations of good form. The abbreviations are inconsistent, both complimentary beginning and ending are wrong, the punctuation is faulty, two sentences are without subjects, and the indentations are irregular and unbalanced, giving the letter a top-heavy, unstable effect. It is perfectly clear what the writer means, but the whole letter has a sloppy, illiterate appearance, and makes a bad effect. If given a chance to explain, the writer would undoubtedly say that he knew better, but that he had the mumps, was in a hurry to get his communication into the mail, and gave very little thought or attention excepting to the facts contained in it. The only answer to this is that we shall all have to do a great many things in a hurry during our lives, and we might just as well begin immediately to learn to do things both rapidly and accurately.

Jan. 13, 1921
Tuscola, Illinois

Dean T. A. Clark
University of Ill.
Urbana, Ills

Dean Clark,

Came home the week end of Jan. 8 and was unable to return to school because of the mumps. Do not know just when I can get back. This letter is so that my absence from classes may be taken care of thru your office.

Yours

The friendly or social letter should have a considerably different form from the business letter. It should taboo abbreviations entirely, it should be written on plain stationery such as has been already suggested, and it should begin and end differently from the business letter. The complimentary beginning should be "Dear Mr. Green" or "Dear Walter," as the closeness of the relationship decides. There is little if any difference between "My dear Grace" and "Dear Grace," some authors holding that one form and some that the other is the more formal. I

think it is a matter of paying your money and taking your choice. It is never correct to begin a letter "Mr. Babcock," or "Friend Harrington," or even "Dear Friend"; such forms are as unconventional and as unsophisticated as saying, "Mr. Brown, meet Mr. Jones," when introducing one man to another. Inexperienced people use such forms because they appear more friendly than the more conventional forms; old people use them because that was the custom when they were young. These last we can justify. If the address of the one to whom it is written is included it should not be placed at the beginning of the letter as is regularly done in business correspondence, but in the lower left-hand corner of the sheet, at the close of the letter. If it is not desired to include such an address at all, and there is no good reason why it should be included so far as I can see, then the letter may begin at once with the complimentary introduction and may give the date and place of writing in the lower left-hand corner at the end of the letter. The two letters below will sufficiently illustrate what I have in mind.

Dear Miss Brown:

I have just read in the morning paper the notice of your recent good fortune in winning a scholarship at Bryn Mawr College. I congratulate you on the good fight you made, and assure you that I am more than pleased that you should have this opportunity to continue your education.

With all good wishes, I am
Very sincerely yours,
MAUDE STRAIGHT CARMAN

Urbana, Illinois
January 26, 1921

Minonk, Illinois
January 25, 1921

My dear Anton:

I want to thank you for sending me the book concerning which I wrote you. I really needed it very much, and there was apparently no other way for me to get it but by bothering you. I hope it will not be long until you can visit us again. We miss you very much.

Sincerely yours,
JAMES A. BLAINE

Mr. Anton J. Janata
218 North Central Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

A married woman in signing her name to a letter addressed to any one excepting her most intimate friends should indicate the fact that she is married. She should sign her own name, as "Elizabeth B. Jones," followed by her husband's name (Mrs. John L.) in parentheses.

Any woman, married or single, should in some way indicate the fact of her sex, when writing to strangers, either by signing her name in full or giving at least one full given name, as "Edith L. White" or "Mary Jane Gray," and by prefixing "Miss" or "Mrs." in parentheses. It is usually confusing and often leads to embarrassing situations for a woman to sign merely her initials, as "M. L. Brown," in her business correspondence, or in correspondence with strangers. Women are not yet so regularly and familiarly addressed in business nor does their correspondence so unerringly show the feminine touch as to reveal their sex in correspondence without a little mechanical help.

What came very nearly being for me an epistolary tragedy not long ago arose from the fact that I had received a business

communication from a lady who erroneously imagined that our acquaintance was sufficiently close for me to recognize her signature in any guise. She signed her name merely with her initials, and not having any very definite impression of her, I, thoughtless man, addressed my letter in reply to "Dear Mr. Brown," not recognizing my fair correspondent. My inexcusable blunder brought down upon me a shower of vigorous criticism and imprecations that would have done credit to any masculine correspondent with whom I have ever done business. The experience taught me a lesson which I am eager to pass on to all of those who may read this book.

The matter of directing the envelope may seem trivial, but the neatly addressed envelope may often very favorably dispose the reader toward the writer even before he has taken the letter into his hand. It is the little things of life which often make a more lasting and definite impression upon us than do the larger and apparently more vital things. The address on an envelope should always occupy a little more than the lower half of the

available space, and should be placed toward the right end of that space. It will usually consist of but three or four lines, and these may be correctly arranged in one of two ways. The first of these is called the block method of arrangement. In this arrangement the lines are placed one under the other without indentation, and usually all punctuation is omitted, although regular punctuation may be used if it is desired. An illustration follows:

Mr. Frank William Scott
806 West Michigan Avenue
Urbana, Illinois

The second method is the more commonly employed. In this the first line of the address is placed very near the middle of the space indicated and the succeeding lines are evenly indented toward the right. The lines should not be indented so far as to give an unsupported or top-heavy effect to the address. This address may or may not be punctuated, as the writer prefers.

Miss Mary Louise Brown,
927 Minerva Street,
Chicago, Illinois.

## WHEN YOU WRITE A LETTER

When in writing a letter one uses single sheets it is always better to write on but one side of the paper. It sometimes seems like a waste of good stationery to do this, but the ease of handling and of reading the letter, and the generally better effect of it all more than compensates for the seeming extravagance. A folded sheet of four pages is written upon in various ways so that it comes to be almost a matter of individual taste as to the order in which the pages shall come. One almost has to learn a new method of procedure with each new correspondent. If a suitable margin were left there is no reason why in writing on folded sheets we should not write straight across successive pages taking pages one, two, three, and four as they come. When no margins are left, as is frequently the case though it should not be, the lines on adjacent pages are likely to run into each other in a rather confusing way. The most common method employed is to write first across the narrow way of page one, to turn to page four next and write across it in the same way, and then to open the sheet and write upon pages two and three in a direction at right

angles to the lines on pages one and four. This would bring the signature and the end of the letter on the side of page three as the folded sheet lies before you. There is no particular sense or reason in this method of procedure; it is a good deal like always having the bow on the left side of one's hat, or a mourning band on one's left sleeve, but it is nevertheless a custom from which it is not wise to deviate.

One should always be careful with his signature. I say this with the more feeling knowing that my own must be a great trial to many people to whom I write and who have never before heard of me. Perhaps the military method of signing the letter over the typewritten name might be a good system to employ in all business letters. It is, in fact, being employed very much more generally in recent years than it was before the war, and it is a practice which may well be encouraged. In social letters, however, written in longhand, there is no such opportunity and here special care should be observed. Even in letters between friends it is not a bad practice to sign one's full name and to do it carefully. At Christmas time I spend

not a few moments in racking my brain to determine who "E. E. F." is or in deciding whether "Mac" is McEldowney, or McMasters, or McGinnis. Sometimes even the envelope when it bears a decipherable postmark, which is seldom, does not help me out a great deal, for one's young friends move without announcement from New York to Seattle, or from St. Louis to Cheyenne. Some men take pride in the cultivation of a signature that can neither be imitated nor deciphered. This fact may protect them from forgery, but it often occasions those to whom they write considerable annoyance, and is no sign either of erudition or of solid business standing. No one can afford so to sign his name unless it is printed or engraved at the top of the sheet upon which he is writing.

I have said nothing about punctuation, and it is, perhaps, unnecessary to say much. The tendency these days is toward simplicity in punctuation and in capitalization. This does not mean, however, that one can wander on interminably without any punctuation marks, or that proper nouns may not still claim the right to be

dignified with a capital letter. In short sentences, such as are commonly met with in ordinary correspondence, very little punctuation is needed. In longer sentences, however, or in the reproduction of conversation, considerable punctuation is required for the sake of accuracy and clearness. If one knows anything about the grammatical construction of sentences, this punctuation is not difficult to learn, and if one does not it is practically hopeless to give directions, for in such a case the writer will continue to use punctuation marks as a college student goes to church —when he feels like it.

The various details with reference to materials and mechanical form to which I have called attention in this chapter go far to the making of a good-looking letter. Their use gives a pleasing appearance and an impression that the writer of the letter is familiar with the ways of the world and that he is a person of experience and good taste. They may be easily learned if one is willing to give a little attention to them, It is surprising how soon they may become habitual, and after they are habitual they seemed a real part of oneself.

# THE FRIENDLY LETTER

# THE FRIENDLY LETTER

"A great many people keep their friends in mind by writing to them," says Booth Tarkington in the *Guest of Quesnay*, "but more do not." "Friendships grow dull," Jowett writes to Margot Asquith, "if two persons do not care to write to one another."

I presume that the friendly letter is the one most commonly written, because people of all ages from nine to ninety write friendly letters, and I suppose, too, that it is the sort which we most commonly intend to write and then don't. The thought is disturbing me as I am writing this paragraph that I had promised myself today to write two friendly letters that should have gone yesterday and that I am afraid may not get off until tomorrow. The friendly letter is the most satisfactory sort of all, for it does not hold the writer to so rigid a routine, it is more flexible and less exacting in its requirements. Ordinarily it need not be written today; its composition may be deferred until tomorrow or next week, or to that pleasant and indefinite future when we plan to accom-

plish all things worthy and worth while; it is the letter we write because it gives us pleasure to do so, or more likely because we hope to give some one else pleasure.

Sometimes, in cases of acute emotion, when the writers are in love for example or imagine they are, the friendly letter is a matter of daily occurrence and goes to great lengths; but this high fever of friendship ordinarily reaches an early crisis and soon burns itself out. The more restrained it is, the more likely it is to be permanent. Friendly correspondence is in general, however, desultory, irregular, and for that reason often the more interesting because the arrival of the letter is unlooked for and unexpected. Once a month or once a year or every once in a while usually tells the story of the friendly letter. Such a correspondence is, as it should be, like the irregular meeting of friends whose paths do not regularly cross and who find keener pleasure in their occasional comings together. The occasional letter, like absence, tends to make the heart grow fonder.

The form of the friendly letter is like that of the letter of courtesy. It omits

from the beginning the street and the city address of the one to whom it is written; it eliminates, whenever possible or convenient, both in form and materials everything that would suggest the business letter, because it really does not concern itself with business. I say advisedly "whenever possible or convenient," because sometimes friendly letters are written in hotels or during business hours when a lull in the rush of business matters gives one a few minutes of leisure which may be occupied in friendly converse, with the materials at hand, just as one often makes a friendly call in his business dress not having either the time or the opportunity to put on the togs specified by the style book for such occasions. Many business men, and other people in fact, keep at hand various sorts of stationery to meet such social and business situations as may arise, but the average man does not make such provision, and takes liberties with social conventions when he is writing to his old friends and uses whatever materials are handiest. It is, however, only between intimate friends, who have known each other a good while, that such negligé in correspondence is per-

missible, or under other extraordinary circumstances.

In the friendly letter the person written to may be addressed, should be addressed in fact, as he would be spoken to in ordinary conversation when the correspondents are face to face. "Dear Bill," "Dear Doctor Brown," "My darling child," will go in a friendly letter if these are the terms ordinarily employed, and the signature may follow equally familiar lines. It is quite permissible to use a nickname; I still continue to address an old classmate, who occupies a most important and dignified position in real life, as "Face"—a name attached to him in college because nature had given him a very plain physiognomy. I am myself generally known by my initials or as "Tommy." It is well to keep in mind, however, that conservatism is always wisest in letter-writing.

It is safest never to write in a letter anything that would embarrass either correspondent or cause difficulty or regret if the letter should fall into other hands than those for which it was intended. Written secrets are dangerous. If it is necessary for you to say to your friend, "Burn this letter

after you have read it," it is just as well usually to burn it before it is sent and before anyone else has had a chance to read it. People generally are pretty careless with their correspondence, and it is safe to conclude that most letters, no matter how confidential they are assumed to be, fall into the hands of more than one person. Things that involve the good character or the exemplary conduct of a third person, particularly private things, things that are vulgar or sentimental, or that are purely personal gossip, are better avoided. Such things are difficult to retract when they have been written, and they are often quite as difficult and embarrassing to face, when, as is often the case, we are forced to do so. I have seen enough of such letters picked up by curious landladies, and inquisitive relatives, and prying acquaintances and sent back to trouble the writer, to realize how humiliating they may sometimes become.

The complimentary close of a friendly letter should usually be the conventional "Sincerely yours," "Cordially yours," or even "Lovingly yours" if that is the way you feel about it. The unusual ending

may be used only when the relationship between the two people concerned is unconventional or unusually friendly and familiar. In such cases the writer may close in any way that seems to him fitting. To close a letter in these days with "Your friend" is not considered quite good form, though there is no reason that any intelligent person can give why it should not be so. Everything that has been previously said concerning sentence structure, paragraphing, good grammar, abbreviations, and similar details holds for the friendly letter. There is as much reason why we should be careful of form and detail in writing to our friends as in writing to anyone else in the world, just as a proper husband feels under obligations to show his wife the same courtesy and thoughtfulness as he accords to other women. One should not neglect to show a man consideration and courtesy just because he is one's friend.

The purpose of friendly letters is to interest our friends, to keep in touch with them, and to keep alive the warm feelings which first awakened the friendship. To accomplish this we must tell them what

they want most to know, and what they usually want to know most concerns ourselves. At the beginning of the recent war a young friend of mine accompanied one of the first American units to go to France. It was with considerable agitation and feeling that I saw him leave, and I waited with eagerness and impatience to receive his first letter. As the days passed I followed in my mind every detail of his progress. I saw him embark, I met all the new friends with whom he came in contact on the voyage, I felt all the excitement contingent upon the dangers which he encountered on the sea, and I finally landed with him in France. I followed him to Paris over a not unfamiliar road, for I had been there two or three times myself, and I then waited to have him confirm all that I had imagined.

His first letter came within a month or so. He was having some difficulty with his credit, he told me; would I write his Chicago banker or call him up over the telephone and get the matter straightened out for him. He was uncertain just what he would get into or where he would be sent. There was not a word about the

voyage or the friends we both knew who were on the boat with him, not a word about himself or his impressions of anything or anybody. He had apparently not thought of me or of any interest I might have in him. I was disappointed, disgusted almost, and I replied as briefly and in as business-like a way as he had written me and wounded his feelings badly by doing so. He wanted what he had not attempted to give me! If he ever had any real adventures during the two years he was gone, he never said so. He philosophized a good deal on the different points of view which he encountered in France, he wrote me the detailed results of his introspections, but he seldom told me anything which I really wanted to know, and so far as he responded to anything which I asked or said in my own letters to him he might never have received or read any one of them. His letters were philosophical essays, not in any sense correspondence.

Another young fellow to whom I write at very irregular intervals makes a quite different impression upon me. His letters are very personal, and no matter how

negligent he is about writing or how long delayed his replies are, I am always quite sure when I receive his letter that when he wrote it he had my last communication before him. He catches my subtlest joke, he responds to my mood, whatever it may have been, as surely as he would have done were we together, and my slightest inquiry never goes unnoticed or unanswered. His letters seem to me almost as satisfying as if we were talking face to face. The difference between these two men was very little in temperament or in training; they were about the same age, they were educated similarly; it was largely a matter of knowing how to write a letter, of appreciating what will interest and hold the attention of one's friends. One kept his readers in mind when he was writing; the other thought very largely of his own personal feelings.

First of all it is well to remember that when people of approximately the same age are writing to each other, unless their main interests are technical or professional, the thing they want most to hear about is each other's movements. Protestations of love and undying friendship are all right

for a time as a subject to dwell upon in friendly correspondence, but we are all more or less the slaves of everyday routine; the day's work takes most of our time and thought, and before we have gone far in our friendly correspondence we begin to inquire, "What are you doing? Where are you going? What are you thinking about? What ambitions are stirring within you?" The main thing that interests us in our friends is the routine of their everyday life and thought.

A friend of mine not long ago read me a letter which she was about to send off to a mutual acquaintance. "You have told her nothing about yourself," I said, "and you haven't seen each other for years. She'll like what you have said, but she would much rather hear about you and your home and your children and your varied interests, than to read the impersonal details with which you have filled your letter."

"But it seems conceited to talk about oneself all the time," my friend replied. Well, so it may, but that is what our friends want unless it is for us to talk a little about themselves.

## WHEN YOU WRITE A LETTER

We have all met people who, no matter how much of an effort we make to introduce a new topic of conversation, continually cling to their own. You say something about your summer's experience, but they continue to discuss their housemaid's eccentricities; you ask a question, but they ignore it, and wander on recounting their own domestic trials, or discoursing on their own personal experiences. There is no one more exasperating than this sort of person in friendly correspondence. You introduce a topic, you throw out a suggestion, or you ask a question in your letter, but your topic is never taken up in his reply, your suggestion is never followed, your question is entirely ignored. It is all as if he had never received or read your letter. The result is disheartening. When you answer a friendly letter, it is safest to have it before you, to have re-read it before you begin the reply, and in imagination, at least, to have a little conversation with the individual to whom you are writing. As you recall his manner, his tricks of conversation, his facial expression, you will respond to these as if he were before you. And conversa-

tion both in writing and in oral discourse involves an interchange of thoughts. Some people have the erroneous idea that it is sufficient if one person does all the talking while the other simply listens, but this is not conversation, it is only monologue.

A real and satisfying reply to a friendly letter requires that all the questions be answered in some way or another, we seldom ask them simply to fill space; that there be a sympathetic response to suggestions, and an understanding and an appreciation of the tone and spirit in which the first letter was written. Otherwise there is no incentive or inspiration to continue the correspondence. "Have you read 'Main Street'?" I ask when I am writing Cornish, "and what do you think of it? It seems to me to have eliminated from the lives of its characters everything that is sweet and kindly and wholesome. It is true in every detail and yet false in that it omits so much that is also quite as true as what is presented." I wait for his reply, eager to get his point of view, for I know he is a keen critic, and that he is quite unlikely to agree with me, but when it comes he makes no reference to my in-

quiry. He has forgotten my question or has possibly never read my letter through. I am disappointed; I feel slighted as I might if I had attempted to take part in a conversation and had been totally ignored or crowded out of the talk.

The friendly letter should avoid formality and stiffness in style. It should be natural and conversational in its use of words, for in reality at its best it is only a conversation on paper. Contractions and elisions and the easy vernacular of everyday speech are not only permissible but quite desirable. Some letters I receive are as formal as a mathematical theorem or as the explanation of a new scientific fact. The friendly letter should be full of "aren't's" and "don't's" and "haven't's" and "shan't's" and the thousand and one contractions that give naturalness and movement to friendly conversation. There are many colloquial words and expressions sometimes closely related to slang which might not pass muster in a formal essay or even in dignified spoken discourse but which would be quite unobjectionable and even commendable in a friendly letter.

## THE FRIENDLY LETTER

Lamb knew how to write a friendly letter. His were usually longer than most of us will today take the time to write, but they were so genuine, so unstudied, so free from conventional cant, so humanly like the man who wrote them. The following letter to his old friend Barron Field illustrates almost everything that is good in a friendly letter:

My dear Barron:

The bearer of this letter so far across the seas is Mr. Lawrey, who comes out to you as a missionary, and whom I have been strongly importuned to recommend to you as a most worthy creature by Mr. Fenwick, a very old, honest friend of mine; of whom, if my memory does not deceive me, you have had some knowledge heretofore as editor of the *Statesman;* a man of talent, and patriotic. If you can show him any facilities in his arduous undertaking, you will oblige us much. Well, and how does the land of thieves use you? and how do you pass your time, in your extra-judicial intervals? Going about the streets with a lantern, like Diogenes, looking for an honest man? You may look long enough, I fancy. Do give me

some notion of the manners of the inhabitants where you are. They don't thieve all day long do they? No human property could stand such continuous battery. And what do they do when they an't stealing?

Have you got a theatre? What pieces are performed? Shakspeare's, I suppose; not so much for the poetry, as for his having once been in danger of leaving his country on account of certain "small deer."

Have you poets among you? Damn'd plagiarists, I fancy, if you have any. I would not trust an idea, or a pocket-handkerchief of mine, among 'em. You are almost competent to answer Lord Bacon's problem, whether a nation of atheists can subsist together. You are practically in one:

*"So thievish 'tis, that the eighth*
*commandment itself*
*Scarce seemeth there to be."*

Our old honest world goes on with little perceptible variation. Of course you have heard of poor Mitchell's death, and that G. Dyer is one of Lord Stanhope's residuaries. I am afraid he has not touched much of the residue yet. He is

positively as lean as Cassius. Barnes is going to Demerara, or Essequibo, I am not quite certain which. Alsager is turned actor. He came out in genteel comedy at Cheltenham this season, and has hopes of a London engagement.

For my own history I am just in the same spot, doing the same thing, (videlicet, little or nothing,) as when you left me; only I have positive hopes that I shall be able to conquer that inveterate habit of smoking which you may remember I indulged in. I think of making a beginning this evening, *viz.* Sunday, 31st Aug., 1817, not Wednesday, 2nd Feb., 1818, as it will be perhaps when you read this for the first time. There is the difficulty of writing from one end of the globe (hemispheres I call 'em) to another! Why, half the truths I have sent you in this letter will become lies before they reach you, and some of the lies (which I have mixed for variety's sake, and to exercise your judgment in the finding of them out) may be turned into sad realities before you shall be called upon to detect them. Such are the defects of going by different chronologies. Your "now" is not my "now"; and again, your "then" is not my "then"; but my "now" may be

your "then," and vice versa. Whose head is competent to these things?

How does Mrs. Field get on in her geography? Does she know where she is by this time? I am not sure sometimes you are not in another planet; but then I don't like to ask Capt. Burney, or any of those that know any thing about it, for fear of exposing my ignorance.

Our kindest remembrances, however, to Mrs. F., if she will accept of reminiscences from another planet, or at least another hemisphere.

C. L.

People of different ages and different experiences are interested in different things. Children are interested in adventures, in things which show surprise, which call for courage or which bring one into contact with personal danger. If there is a touch of sentiment or romance in it, so much the more will it please the young girl. If it involves personal encounters with wild animals, rivalry in sport, or hairbreadth escapes from death, it fascinates the boy. There is nothing like a painted Indian or a grizzly bear, a catamount or a jaguar to stir up interest when

writing to a boy. I don't really know just what a jaguar is, but I know he is interesting and dangerous. Things mean more to a boy than do people. No one recognized this fact better than Theodore Roosevelt, and he has utilized it to a most interesting degree in his letters to his children. It is about dogs and horses and bobcats and other delightful animals that he constantly writes. One becomes acquainted with his dogs as if they were people with human characteristics and human feelings. Turk, the bloodhound, and "the pig named Maude" who went about the camp picking up scraps, and Skip, and Jack, are all like characters in a story book. As we read on through the letters we look eagerly for the reappearance of the familiar names as, I am sure, the Roosevelt children did while they were waiting for the coming of their father's next letter.

Men in active life are usually interested in business and sports and sometimes in politics, and these things should be kept in mind when writing to them in a friendly way. Their own particular business interests them more than does any other man's.

If you are writing to a farmer it is better to discuss crops and live stock and the prices of pork and other farm products than it is to ramble on concerning fashions and foulard, as if your friend were running a ladies' furnishing shop. His interests and tastes must always be considered. Women are fondest of personal gossip. They are more concerned with people than with things. Their time is taken up normally with the details of home life and association with their neighbors, and it is these that they dwell most upon in their letters. Intimate things are to them most interesting and most vital. Here is a Christmas letter, full of appreciation, cheerful, happy, and delightfully frank and personal. It makes one eager for the next one. It isn't written by Lamb or Stevenson or even by Charlotte Brontë, but just by a healthy, intelligent, friendly human being.

Dearest Alice:

I had your card this morning, and it was such a dear one that I came near shedding tears on my toast at the breakfast table. I am so sorry about

your eye, and know that it must be a most miserable experience. I surely hope it will be well in less than three months. I appreciate your writing at all.

I took your package to Wilmington with me, and did not waste any time in opening it on Christmas morning. Your gifts are always a delight, and I do a lot of bragging because Tom has a hand in them. I love this blue one, and my "face and fancy" are entirely suited. It is perfect on mahogany, and I have had a brown fruit basket on it, and to-day tried a blue bowl with a gay flowered rim, the blue in the bowl being just a shade deeper. I look with wonder and admiration upon the intricacies of that edge.

Are you wondering at the change in our address? I should have told you before about our adventures in housekeeping. We sold our house in August, and are living in an apartment until we can find a house we like better. We are on the first floor and have a back porch and a lawn and plenty of room and the cat, and I like it so well that I am not even thinking about a house at present.

Roger is in Rochester for a year as chemist in the Eastman Research lab-

oratory and returns to Hopkins in the fall for three years for his Ph.D. Richard is in his second year in Engineering, but is greatly interested in printing. Little A. K. is eight years old and goes to Friends' School. Arthur goes on frequent business trips, and you may see him one of these days. We are within two blocks of the University, so Richard leaves at eight twenty-nine for his eight thirty class.

Arthur is deep in "The Beloved Vagabond,"—do you and Tom adore "Aristide Pujol?" The boys had fits over it. And have you read any of Christopher Morley's books? I thought "Parnassus on Wheels" was great, and have read some of "Shandygaft."

I am so glad you had a fine Christmas. Arthur gave me a banjo clock which he got at Ovington's when he was in New York just before Christmas, and a lamp for my dressing table. We all went to Wilmington as Father has not been well, and did not feel like leaving home. My sister lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, and has a darling baby a year old whom we call "Little Liz" to distinguish her from grandmother. The family history being now

concluded, I send you a kiss, and a Happy New Year, and two good eyes.

Having a new letter from you, I will tear up the one I had last year.

Loving you, as ever,

REBECCA

January 4, 1921.

People who are past their youth are fondest of reminiscence. The days of their childhood linger most tenderly in their memories. The friends with whom they went to school, the roads they traveled in boyhood, the scenes of early adventure when they were young and strong, have for them the keenest interest. Walter Nicholson wrote me not many months ago. We lived "across the section" from each other when we were children, just a mile apart, and we were together regularly. We have not seen or heard much of each other since we were eighteen, I think, and his home is hundreds of miles from mine. The letter is full of references to "Prairie Star" and "Kentucky" school houses, to spelling bees and revival meetings. Where are all the old fellows, he wants to know: Ves Byers, and Taylor Curtis, and the Gregory boys? And what

has become of the Baily girls? What hilarious times we used to have with them. So he rambled on, recalling old experiences and bringing back old memories. It was an interesting and delightful letter which made me feel young again, when I was able to forget how many years had intervened since we had walked together across the prairies or driven along the flower-bordered roads. It was unconscious art which gave him the power to re-create in my mind the vivid pictures of my young manhood.

Sometimes we may take for granted that our friends will be interested in the same things in which we find interest, but not always. It is safest, before we begin to write the friendly letter, to study the epistle to which we are making a reply, and then to give some serious consideration to the personal interests, to the likes and dislikes of the one to whom we are writing. Writing a friendly letter is like starting a conversation with a friend. There are a thousand things about which we might write. We should not write that which is most pleasing to us, but that which is likely to be most interesting to

him. That is the secret well worth your learning, of the effective friendly letter.

# FORMAL NOTES

## FORMAL NOTES

My sister Virginia was giving a dinner, and she asked me to help her write the invitations. For several reasons the invitations were to be written and not engraved. Virginia is a stickler for social conventions and for thoroughly good form, so she couldn't have them printed, for both she and I knew that that would suggest that we are common and vulgar and inexperienced in social affairs; only those who are ignorant of what is done by the most careful people, or those who choose for the sake of haste or economy to ignore social conventions, ever have their calling cards or their invitations printed. There was not time to have them engraved, for Virginia had decided rather hastily to give the dinner, she could secure the caterer only upon a certain night, and she knew that she would have to give her guests ten days in which to reply to her invitation and to get their feathers preened up. The written invitation is quite as good form as is the engraved one, and so, as I said, my sister decided to write her invitations, and she asked me to help her.

It was to be a thoroughly nice dinner and a good-sized one. The guests comprised the best people of the town, that is the most experienced socially, the most refined, the best educated. It was no common country village in which Virginia lived, but a college town where culture and literary taste flourished, so we were justified in supposing that everything would be done both by the hostess and her guests in the most conventional form.

The invitation was written in *the* recognized form which such invitations are supposed to follow. We used Virginia's correspondence cards with her monogram stamped in gold in one corner. The writing was carefully placed on the card with wide margins so as to give the best possible suggestion of care and thoughtful arrangement. Such things count for more than most persons suppose. The card read:

> Miss Virginia Gale requests the pleasure of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hoover's company at dinner on Wednesday evening May the eleventh at seven o'clock, Cosmos Club, Locust and Olive Streets.

They were all mailed promptly, and then we waited for the replies—formal replies they should have been, written in the third person and couched in the same direct language as had been employed in the invitation.

"How is your dinner coming on?" I asked Virginia three days later when she had had ample time to hear from every one. She smiled in reply and showed me a little pile of envelopes. Now every one knows who has had any experience or who has thought about it at all that a formal invitation should have an immediate reply; especially is this true of an invitation to dinner. The hostess must know exactly how many guests she is to entertain, she must prepare her menu, and arrange her tables, and decide upon the seating of her guests. Otherwise she will offend some one or her dinner will be a higgledy-piggledy affair without order or definite arrangement, and that was not the sort of dinner that Virginia was planning to give.

I took the envelopes in my hand, less than a dozen of them, and looked them over. They were of all shades and sizes, pink, lavender, cream, and yellow; there

were business envelopes with bold printed return cards in the corner, and there were envelopes so tiny as to suggest the announcement of a birth. The acknowledgments were equally bizarre. Mrs. Turner —her husband received a doctor's degree from Yale and teaches English—began her note "Dear Friend" and signed it "Yours Truly" with two capital letters, not being satisfied to make one error only in her complimentary close. Bob Bates, whom I had always looked upon as a shining example of what one ought to do and be in social affairs, wrote a rather crude informal note and used the stationery designed for the business operations of his uncle Ed's hardware store. Miss Eleanor Pratt, whose father is president of one of our local banks and who herself is a graduate of a most widely advertised girls' finishing school, affirmed that "Miss Pratt regrets that owing to a previous engagement, she *will be* unable to accept," etc., instead of saying as she really meant that she *is* unable to do so. Not a third of those invited had replied and only Mr. Scott's note was in actually perfect form, the only form which could correctly be

used, in fact. His stationery was beautifully simple and refined, with his street number embossed in dark blue at the top. His penmanship was even and regular and the note was carefully placed in the middle of the folded sheet. The indentations and the margins were very pleasing to the eye. When you saw the envelope, even before you took the card into your hand, you recognized the fact that Mr. Scott is a gentleman who knows social conventions and who follows them punctiliously.

> Mr. Scott accepts with pleasure Miss Virginia Gale's invitation to dinner, at seven o'clock on the evening of the eleventh of May.

The acknowledgments came straggling in until the day of the dinner. Some of those invited called up on the telephone at the last moment and declined or accepted, one or two sent word by friends, and in sheer desperation Virginia called up others to find out whether or not they were coming, explaining her action on the ground that she was afraid her own notes had gone astray in an uncertain mail. In one way or another she heard from the

most of her guests before the hour set for the meal. Mrs. Barnes, sensitive though absent-minded, arrived without either having accepted or declined her invitation, it appearing later that she thought she really had accepted. Three days after the dinner had been given a tardy note of apology was received from Dr. Earle in which he explained that the arrival of some friends from Seattle just at the time Miss Gale's note came had entirely driven the matter of her dinner out of his mind, and he had just that morning come upon it while straightening up his desk. He trusted that his seeming neglect had not caused Virginia any undue annoyance.

We kept all the acknowledgments, varied and many-colored as they were, and looked them over, after the dinner was a thing of the past, and commented on them. There was considerable food for thought in the little pile of envelopes and in the collection of bizarre notes which they contained.

"If these people," Virginia said to me, "who have been to boarding schools and college, who have traveled in every civilized country in the world and in some un-

civilized ones, who are the social leaders in an uncommonly cultivated and educated community, are as ignorant and as careless of social forms and conventions as my guests were, don't you think you ought to write something for the education of young people and the general public with reference to these matters?"

"I believe I will," I replied. And that explains why I am giving such specific information and directions in this chapter. I remember very little that I learned in college, a condition not uncommon I imagine, but one of the things I do recall was said by my professor of English.

"In explaining anything to a general audience you should remember that they are always more ignorant than you think." If I err, then, in this direction, blame it on my early teaching.

Every one receives formal notes at one time or another even if he does not acknowledge them, for a large percentage of such communications are for one reason or another—carelessness, or indifference, or ignorance, or the delay which makes it unnecessary to do so many things in life —not answered or acknowledged at all.

There are announcements of births and deaths, engagements and marriages; there are invitations to weddings and dinners, and there is for the writer of these notes a correct form to be used and for the recipient something to be said or done and a proper time and a proper method of saying or doing it.

The formal note of invitation or announcement should be written or engraved. There is no more logical reason why it should not be printed than there is why one should not eat with his knife or keep his hat on in the house. Children used to be told that there was a danger of cutting themselves if they ate with their knives, but there is equal danger of wounding themselves with the prongs of a fork. There is really no reason why we should not eat with our knives excepting a conventional one. It is not the custom; refined people generally in English-speaking countries do not do it; and there is an end of the matter. The same thing is true of the printed announcement or invitation or calling card. It shows a lack of social experience, unacquaintance with careful social forms, it suggests the common and the

vulgar. You ask why? There is no reason. People with the widest social experience and the best breeding just don't do it that way, and that is all.

It is in quite good form to omit titles in the formal note and call every man plain "Mister" though the one who does this will sometimes give offense to judges and doctors of medicine, and to military officials, who commonly adhere very closely to the titles to which they can legitimately lay claim. A friend of mine, a high college official, was introduced by a physician as "Mr. Jones" though he was entitled to be called "Dean," but when he in turn introduced the physician as "Mr. Brown," he was corrected by the medicine man and reminded that he was "Doctor Brown." It is well, therefore, to keep these points in mind, for though it is never discreditable or discourteous to call any ordinary man "Mister," yet some men will not like it; and more women will object if their husband's titles are not recognized. If you ignore the convention, you must not be annoyed if some people think you do not belong in the first class.

It is a general custom in formal notes

when names are used to write them in full. It is better to say, "Mr. and Mrs. James Brown Scott" than "Mr. and Mrs. James B. Scott." We can properly write "Mr. and Mrs. Scott" if their identity is sufficiently clear to warrant the omission of the surnames, but it is not good form to use initials only, as "Mr. and Mrs. J. B. Scott." Such a method is too business-like and suggests haste and lack of care.

The formal note is written in the third person throughout as:

> Mr. and Mrs. Wendell Phillips request the pleasure of Miss Julia Marlowe's company at dinner on Wednesday evening, June twenty-seventh, at seven o'clock. Woodbine Cottage, 1110 West Illinois Street, Urbana, Illinois.

If the persons concerned all live in the same city, only the street number need be given at the end of the note, and in cases of intimacy even that may be omitted.

In the engraved invitation it is not always so easy to adhere strictly to the third person throughout the note. In this country at least, the engraved invitation

commonly changes to the second person in order to avoid the writing in of the name of the one invited, and so follows something of a mongrel method. Such an invitation reads as follows:

> Mr. and Mrs. David McConoughey request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their daughter Elizabeth to Mr. Robert Rea Brown on Saturday evening the twentieth of November at eight o'clock. Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair, New Jersey.

Here the invitation uses the pronoun "your" to apply to any one to whom the invitation may be addressed instead of including the name of each specific individual invited.

In England the third person would be strictly adhered to whether the invitation were written or engraved, and would read:

> Mr. and Mrs. Walter Williams request the pleasure of Miss Althea Marsh's company at luncheon on Tuesday January the eleventh at one o'clock. 302 West Hill Street.

A blank space would be left in the engraved note for writing in the name "Miss Althea Marsh." Such a procedure seems, perhaps, finical or overparticular for an American, and it is seldom followed, though if we want to be punctiliously correct we should follow it.

In general in such notes most punctuation is omitted excepting the period following abbreviations, and no abbreviations should be used excepting the most conventional ones, like "Mr." and "Mrs."

The better the materials used in the writing of any note, or in an engraved note, the more favorable impression will be made, and this is especially true of the formal note. Tinted paper, unless it be gray, is in very questionable taste; white is always the safest; pink and lavender are, I think, most commonplace and vulgar. They suggest the child or the rustic. Double sheets of note paper of any adult conventional size or correspondence cards approximately three and one-half by five and one-half inches of thoroughly good quality are the most appropriate materials to be used in writing such notes, and refined people commonly use only black ink.

The paper or the cards may bear the writer's monogram or coat of arms or an embossed street address. The envelopes should fit the paper once folded and should be of the same quality as the paper. This last specification should go without saying, I suppose, but I have seen so many instances where it did not do so, that I hesitate to let the matter pass without additional emphasis or comment.

The formal note of invitation should always have a formal acknowledgment, and there is but one general form. The specific choice of nouns and adjectives may be varied to suit the emotions or the temperament of the individual, but the form is the same. You can be "charmed" or "delighted" or "very much pleased" to accept an invitation as the mood or the circumstance strikes you; you can "regret" with any adverb attached that pleases you, but you should not vary from a set arrangement and order. If you must decline an invitation, it is not good form to say that you "will be unable to accept" the invitation, but that you "are unable." The present tense is always the correct one, as for instance:

> Mr. Frank King Robeson very much regrets that owing to an enforced absence from the city, he is unable to accept Mr. and Mrs. George Bennett's invitation to dinner on Tuesday evening the ninth of June at seven o'clock.

There are so many varieties of formal notes and announcements that one is sometimes at a loss to know just what he ought to do or say. I find in the morning mail various formal announcements. George Ward, an old friend of mine, has gone into partnership with some one in Spokane, and he wants me to know it; Randolph Eide and his wife have a new baby, and a little card gives me the information; John Honens is going to be married to Elizabeth Butler, whom I have never met, and her parents, with whom, also, I am unacquainted, invite me to the wedding; Betty Crawford has been married to a man I have never before heard of, and her parents announce the wedding. What should I do in each of these several cases?

The first note is simply for my information and does not demand an acknowledgment, though if I am polite and

interested, as I should be, I may write George informally and congratulate him upon his advancement and assure him that I am glad to know of his success. Courtesy and diplomacy both require that I should reply to the announcement of the baby's birth. Parents expect a reply, for they are usually pretty sensitive regarding any lack of attention to their offspring and resent any slights or neglect in that direction more even than they would if these were directed toward themselves. Such announcements, however, should bear somewhere an address to which an acknowledgment may be sent, and in most cases which come under my notice do not do so. I shall have to write Mr. and Mrs. Eide and tell them how lucky they are to have this young American to train and to spend their money on, and how much I envy them the opportunity. This note, also, will be an informal one. The wedding invitation requires one note and admits of two others. I must accept or decline the invitation of the parents at once, and this must be done in a formal note addressed to them and similar to the invitation. I ought to write an informal

note to John Honens congratulating him on his marriage and wishing him well, for I have known him all his life, he has done me the courtesy to recall our old friendship at the time of his approaching marriage, and it is to him I owe the pleasure of the invitation. I should be rather thoughtless and crude, and I should miss an opportunity to cement a very happy relationship, if I did not return his courtesy with a similar one. If I feel like making a little present to the newly formed household, this must be sent to the bride, and even though I do not know her, the fact that I am a near friend of her husband to be gives me the right to address her in an informal note and to say whatever pleasant and gracious things may come to my mind. If I do not wish to write her I may simply enclose my calling card with whatever I send.

In general, then, every formal announcement or invitation admits of an acknowledgment or requires one. The invitation should be accepted or declined on the day it is received. Such a procedure is only in justice to the hostess who must make specific preparation for the enter-

tainment of her guests. If you are uncertain it is better to decline than to annoy her by holding up her plans for your convenience. If you want to make friends, if you would like to gain a reputation for thoughtful courtesy and punctilious regard for social conventions, you will in some way acknowledge every formal note which you receive even if the conditions existing do not actually require such an acknowledgment, and you will do it with your own hand even though the stenographer is unoccupied while you are doing it, for the stenographer, useful and necessary as she is, is for purposes of business and not for social courtesy.

# THE BUSINESS LETTER

## THE BUSINESS LETTER

The business letter is not different from other sorts of letters excepting that it has a somewhat different purpose. It is not to amuse or to please or to show social courtesy; its object is to get things done, to present facts, to give information, or to ask for it. Its construction is logical and direct rather than imaginative. Its appeal is to the intellect and to the judgment rather than to the feelings or the emotions. "Business English," about which so much has been said in recent years and about which books even have been written, is not a different genus of English from that employed in any other form of prose discourse. We should use the same forms of correct speech and the same sentence structure in doing business whether orally or in writing as we do in making love or in writing an essay or in giving an after-dinner speech, excepting that our approach and our rhetorical style should perhaps sometimes be different.

In a business letter we should get at the thing on hand at once. This does not mean that in writing such a letter we

should use the condensed method employed in a telegram and by the omission of subjects, predicates, and articles attempt to say as much as we can in as few words as possible. It is as necessary in a business letter to use complete sentences with all their relationships made evident and with all their physical members intact, as it is in any other sort of letter. Terseness, directness are in no way synonymous with the omission of vital and necessary parts of a sentence.

"Would like catalog of your school," a business man writes me. "Have son who is now in high school and will graduate in spring. Want him to take engineering course. Would like to know cost and possibility of finding good lodging place for him, Yours"

His communication resembles a night letter, kept punctiliously within the conventional fifty words as if he were making a strenuous effort to economize time and to reduce expense, rather than a business letter from an intelligent man who has something normal to say. Translated into English it would read:

I should like to have you send me a catalog of your school. I have a son who is now in the high school and who will graduate in the spring. I want him to take an engineering course, and I should like to know how much it will cost and the possibility of finding a good lodging place for him.

Very truly yours,

Lincoln's letter to Mrs. Clarissa Bishop with reference to certain matters pertaining to the settlement of her estate is an admirable illustration of what a business letter should be like. It is personal and friendly; it does not waste a single word, its sentences are simple and complete, and it goes without circumlocution directly to the point. When you read it you know that it was written by a real man writing to a specific individual.

"A friend of yours, Dr. Cheney, has been consulting me in your behalf about the estate of your late husband. It is not improbable that I shall pass through Le Roy next Sunday; and if I do, I will call to see you.

"I understand your husband died without making a will and without any child;

and if this is so, there is no doubt that you, as his widow, are entitled to half of his real estate and all his personal property, after the debts of the estate are paid. Give yourself no uneasiness about this whatever; and be tempted into no bargains or agreements, with interested parties, about this matter."

There is a pretty general feeling, also, that abbreviations, contractions, and figures are not only admissible in a business letter, but that such a letter loses something of its business-like character if they are not used. Certain texts on "Business English" would give this impression. Abbreviations are most frequently an indication of carelessness, or haste, or laziness. They have about the same effect upon the appearance of an otherwise good-looking business letter as a man who goes to a party and who wears no coat. The writer gets on more quickly, but the effect of their use is seldom a pleasing one. The only advantage in using figures instead of words in any letter is that figures economize space and appeal more directly to the eye than do numbers expressed in written words. Their appearance is not so good,

and most careful writers do not now use them. Letters written by business men who have given thoughtful attention to form, are not marred by sentences without subjects and verbs, and are remarkably free from all sorts of abbreviations. Brevity is a quality which should be sought, but it is not dependent upon the omission of necessary elements of a sentence, or upon the regular use of abbreviations; it is attained by the elimination of unnecessary details and superfluous qualifying phrases. Directness is a very essential quality in a business letter. When one means "no" it is just as well to say it at once.

"Goshen College has applied for admission to the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools," I wrote a University president a few years ago, "and the executive committee of the Association, knowing that you are acquainted with both the standards of the Association and the equipment and curriculum of the College, would like to know if you think the College comes up to the requirements of the Association and if you are willing unqualifiedly to recommend its admission."

His reply came back in a few days as follows:

"I have known President Cooke of Goshen College for many years and have the very highest regard for him. He and I were in college together, and have kept up our friendship ever since. He is a man of excellent training and of the highest ideals. Since going to Goshen he has reorganized its faculty and materially increased its endowment. He has the confidence and the respect of every one with whom he is associated, and his work and influence in building up the college have been extremely gratifying. He is in every way an excellent executive and a Christian gentleman." And so he rambled on for two pages.

In acknowledging this letter I said, "Your personal relations with President Cooke of Goshen College, I gather from your letter which I have just received, have been very pleasant, and your testimonial as to his character and his work at the college I find interesting. What I want to get, however, is a direct statement as to whether you think the college is at the present time meeting the requirements

laid down by the North Central Association and if you would recommend its immediate admission." In his next letter, which consisted of four lines, he said that he was sorry to have to say that he must answer "no" to both of my queries. Through indirectness, in his first letter, he was attempting to evade my questions and to have me draw an entirely false conclusion. He knew what was true, but he wanted to evade the responsibility of stating the truth; he hoped so to disguise the truth that it might appear in a more favorable light than if baldly stated. The same effect is often attained when the writer is in doubt as to just what he wants to say. Like a speaker who has made no preliminary preparation, he wanders on, hoping that by saying a good deal he will ultimately reach something that is direct and definite.

One of the most skilful letter-writers whom I know always very carefully plans his letters before he begins to dictate them. When in his correspondence he comes upon a letter difficult to answer, he lets it go until the next day, takes it home with him at night, and writes out in direct and com-

plete sentences the specific points he wants to make in his reply, very much as he was taught in college to prepare a formal brief for an argument. Then, when he is ready to dictate his letter or to write it out in longhand, he knows what he wants to say, and he gets at it without circumlocution or delay. The man who carefully plans his letters before he begins to write them, especially if they are difficult, saves time, gains clearness, and says more in fewer words than one who rushes in unprepared to tackle a difficult epistolary job.

This last method of planning carefully before putting statements into cold type is especially to be commended if there is a possibility that what one says may be quoted, or passed from one person to another, or used finally as evidence. In such cases one can not be too careful in the expression of what one wants to say.

Every business letter if possible should be complete in itself. It should show at once both the address of the writer and of the one to whom it is written. It should state the business with which it is concerned briefly and clearly. It should not

be necessary to see the envelope in which the letter came or, excepting in unusual circumstances, to refer back to previous correspondence to get at the facts essential to the answering of the letter in hand. The references to the subject under consideration should be accurate and full enough to require no further investigation or explanation. I have on my desk as I write these sentences a letter which I can by no possibility answer intelligently until I get further details. The writer's reference to the business under discussion is vague, and his previous correspondence, even when I have dug it out of the files, does not adequately disclose the significance of the matters to which he refers in his last letter. If one has only a very limited correspondence, then he may reasonably be expected to carry in mind most of the details of what has been previously said, but if his letters run from fifty to one hundred or five hundred a day and cover a wide range of topics the case is different. An illustration is before me.

"Your letter with reference to my son's scholastic record for the past semester is

before me. Will you not please give me some explanation as to why he has done so badly and how I can help to improve conditions?"

A woman's name is signed to the letter, and it is a very common name. I go through all records of my office to find a son whose home address corresponds to the one the woman had given in her letter, but I can discover none. Then I search through the long list of delinquent students whose parents I have communicated with in recent weeks, and ultimately I find the man I am looking for and the reason for not discovering him more readily. His mother, interesting woman, has been married the second time, and the second husband's name was different from the name of her first husband and consequently different from her son's name. As she had written me once before she had supposed that I would recall this slight irregularity. The omission of the detail which she thought trifling, had, however, cost me the expenditure of a considerable amount of time and energy. When you read your business letter before you sign it, as you always should, make sure that

what you have said will not need further investigation or explanation before it is clear to the man who is to receive it.

I have learned nothing more fully during the years that I have done business with various sorts of people than that surprise or the unexpected is the most compelling influence one can use with people. If I call a student to my office to talk over things with him, he has worked out before he comes in all that I am going to say to him and what his defense is to be. If he has been derelict, he has an adequate explanation; if he has been absent from classes, he has a dozen legitimate excuses on his tongue's end. My only hope of getting anywhere is to present my case in a way for which he is not prepared. A clever book salesman comes to see me once a year, and though I think before he makes his annual call that I am all steeled and set for him, I invariably fall, and yet he has never really asked me to buy. He studies my personal tastes, he lays his wares before me alluringly and always in a different manner from the one he employed in any previous year. His coming fascinates me, for I am always anxious and

interested to see what new method he will employ to get my trade. I am never fully prepared; he always surprises me; he is practically always too much for me. I think I have never been able to resist him but once. I am wondering now what strategic move he will make next year.

The same principle holds in writing business letters. In nothing else does originality, surprise, the unexpected count more toward bringing success, and in winning your correspondent over to your way of thinking. When you say what he expects you to say, you are dull, and he gives little attention to your line of talk; when you spring the unexpected he wakes up and finds some interest in what you have to say. We are all prepared to meet the conventional; it is only when the unexpected arises that we are taken off our guard.

The father of a student who had failed wrote me a year or two ago. He is a business man in a city of some size in a neighboring state, and though he seems to know business, he doesn't use the English language with the accurate care one might desire.

"Donald says he took French and passed his examination and that his teacher, hurrying off, lost his paper and he got no credit. If that's true I don't think much of your method of running a school after a pupil has done the work and paid the tuition. And you put him on probation on failure of the teacher. It don't look to me like a square deal, and I will give you a chance to explain before I take him out of school. Another study, Rhetoric. He sprained his ankle and couldn't be at the examinations. It looks to me you could of given him an examination without putting him on probation. It looks to me that if a teacher is any good he could of given him a grade on daily recitations. If he isn't doing good work, why not? I will not keep him in school a minute longer unless he is doing good work."

My answer was brief. I stated that the boy's paper in French was not lost but that he had failed the final examination. He did have a sprained ankle, but this fact did not keep him away from his rhetoric test. He was behind in his assignments and would have failed even had he taken

the test, and knowing this he did not go. His work at the present time, I said, was not good. If the father wished to withdraw his son, I suggested, that his own state university was an excellent institution. The tuition was somewhat higher than in our own, but the college was nearer his home and he might there find conditions and methods of instruction which would better satisfy him. I think my answer was not what he expected, though it must have been satisfactory to him, for he did not withdraw his son, and when later he visited him he called on me, and we had a very placid interview.

A great many people seem to object to the use of the personal pronoun "I" in business letters. I have never understood why, for it is as good a pronoun as there is in the language, and it expresses as clear and direct a meaning as any word in use. I have known men to go far out of their way to say "we" or "the writer" when they really meant "I." In addition to failing to say what they actually wanted to say, they lost a good deal in directness and in personal appeal. Of course, if one writes as the representative of a firm or a

family it is quite right to say "we," but if it is the letter of one individual to another there is no adequate reason why the more personal "I" should not be used. It is self-consciousness or exaggerated modesty to want to conceal your personality by the use of general terms, and such use results in stiffness and formality. It is argued sometimes that in using "we" the writer divides the responsibility for his statements, but he really deceives no one.

In the friendly letter or the letter of courtesy there is almost always a close acquaintanceship or even an intimacy between the correspondents which makes the immediate recognition of the writer of the letter concerned quite easy. Even if the penmanship is obscure or irregular the signature of the writer can always be deciphered without much difficulty. A very different situation, however, obtains as regards the business letter. A great many business letters come from persons one has never heard of before—persons whose names are strange and unfamiliar and almost impossible to decipher. Men often seem to torture their signatures into the most impossible hieroglyphics resem-

bling in no way the characters which we were taught in the elementary schools. The reasons for this illegibility are sometimes haste, sometimes carelessness, and often an attempt to form a signature that would be difficult to imitate or forge. Some of these signatures look more like a Chinese laundry bill than an attempt to write English script. I receive letters regularly from a Boston attorney whose name appended to his communications does not show a single character which has any semblance to anything in the written alphabet in English; I have letters before me from a country banker and a Chicago business man that are as vague to me as the inscriptions of the Rosetta stone. It is only by referring to the names engraved at the top of the sheet that I am able even approximately to guess what the characters are intended to represent. I have been told that my own signature often is not much more intelligible.

Unless a business man has his name printed or engraved somewhere upon his stationery he should write carefully enough for a stranger to recognize his name with a minimum of effort. Anyone

can learn to write his name legibly if he will only take the time and the pains. It is conceit to suppose that one is so well known that his signature will be generally recognized no matter how illegibly written it may be. A great many people feel as I do about it, as is proved by the following letter which came to my desk since I began writing these paragraphs:

"I am in receipt of a letter under date of March 23rd written on University of Illinois stationery, by a student in the University who is applying for a place as teacher. I am not able to decipher his or her name, and therefore, am writing to you.

"The name looks as if it might be Arlone Tumley or Artoro Sumley. It may be that the letter is an 'L' or an 'S' or it may be intended for an 'F' and you may be able to find the name listed in your files. Please have this person write me again.

"I am very sorry that a person applying for English work or for any position in the High School can not write well enough to be read." So are we all, say I.

It seems like a silly platitude to insist that business letters, more than other let-

ters in fact, should be answered promptly. There should usually be some acknowledgment on the day on which the letter is received. Neglect and delay in answering important letters is a habit, which one can cultivate, like staying away from Church or sleeping late in the morning. There is little excuse for it but selfishness. Even if one's business does not require that he keep a regular stenographer and makes it necessary for him to write his own letters, yet if he will have a place to keep his unanswered mail and a time for attending to it, the matter will become as regular as meals or as keeping his face washed, and it is in fact quite as important as either of these physical details. An unanswered business letter brands a man as careless and unreliable.

There are a good many types of business letters, but the general style and form of each is about the same. If a printed or engraved letterhead is used, this will take care of a considerable number of details. It will ordinarily indicate the writer's name, business, and business address, with a date line often partially filled in. The envelope in which it is mailed should carry

a return card in one corner indicating the name and address of the writer so that the letter may be returned if it cannot be delivered to the one to whom it is written. The return address should be written or printed on the front of the envelope and not on the back as it is done by some men and most women. The letter given below is a satisfactory illustration of the form and content of a good business letter and the envelope containing it:

PHONE: GARFIELD 1702

I. M. BILDERBACK
DEALER IN
DODGE BROTHERS MOTOR VEHICLES
338-340 HICKORY STREET
CHAMPAIGN, ILL.

November 30, 1920.

Mr. John L. Jones,
Henry, Illinois.

My dear Mr. Jones:

Relative to our hasty conversation of last evening in regard to an enclosed car, I wish to refer you to the enclosed statement which coincides precisely with my views as to the automobile situation. First, I assure you that Dodge Brothers' cars will not be reduced in

price. Next, I am able to procure cars at present, in fact am accumulating them as fast as my finances will permit.

I have in stock at present a car which I believe will please you and the situation is as follows: I expect to carry some of the cars that I am receiving until March 1. With this in view, I will make you the following proposition. I will deliver you the car immediately and in settlement will take your personal note to March 1, without interest, or, if you prefer paying for it at this time, I will deduct interest at seven percent from the time of delivery to March 1.

Inasmuch as your preference is a closed car, I assure you that winter driving will be fully appreciated in one and with the above proposition you can have the use of both your money and the car.

If you are interested I should be pleased to show you the car at your home at any time.

Very truly yours,

I. M. Bilderback,
Dodge Brothers Dealer.

IMB:D
Enclosure

I. M. BILDERBACK
DODGE BROTHERS MOTOR CARS
338-340 HICKORY STREET
CHAMPAIGN, ILL.

Mr. John L. Jones,
Henry, Illinois.

If an enclosure accompanies the letter it should be mentioned in the body of the letter, and the word *enclosure* placed at the lower left-hand corner in order that whoever is responsible for placing the enclosure in the envelope may not be required to read the whole letter in order to see what is required. Nothing is more annoying than to receive a letter which was supposed to contain a draft or a circular or a sample of a textile or something or other and then find that the important enclosure has been omitted. "There ought t' be a heavy penalty," Abe Martin says, "fer writin' 'enclosed find clippin'.' and then not puttin' th' clippin' in."

Very few business men do more than to read and sign their letters after they have

dictated them, and many letters, when the stenographer can be depended upon to write what one has said, are "dictated and not read." A friend of mine signs his letters "read but not dictated," for the reason, he explains, that he likes to convey the impression that he is sufficiently interested in his correspondence and his correspondents to give a little attention to both. There is a suggestion of insolence, of superiority, in the "dictated but not read" that is irritating to not a few people. It is a question whether or not one should admit under his own signature that he thinks so little of the accuracy of what he has written that he is willing to let it go without verifying it. The one who receives such a letter has the right to feel a little slighted, a little humiliated, and especially so if the correspondence is of any especial importance.

It is often very desirable that the writer of a letter should indicate his position or his title. If he is the secretary or the president of the firm, if he is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, or director of the corporation he should indicate this fact below his signature. The importance of

what one says is very often influenced largely by one's position, and it is generally wise to indicate this.

Whatever the situation may be the tone of a business letter should always be courteous. "The customer is always right" is a phrase pretty hard to live up to in many instances, but it is always wise to do so. No matter how sarcastic and scathing a letter may be, even if it approach the limit of insult, there is everything to be gained by keeping one's self-possession, and exhibiting self-control. The most effective reply to such a letter is brevity, dignity, and courtesy. The man who will not be thrown off his guard and descend to discourtesy will ultimately win.

A good many people feel that the grammatical, carefully phrased letter with well-constructed sentences and correctly spelled words is essential only when doing business with the cultivated. I listened not long ago to a young college graduate of a middle west institution who was trying to impress me with the practical character of a set of books of which he was trying to dispose. He made all sorts of crude errors, his pronouns seldom revealed any

correct relationships, and his verbs were tortured into the weirdest forms.

"Why do you speak so murderously bad?" I asked him when he gave me a chance to say something.

"The ordinary vernacular always makes a hit with the 'hicks,' " he replied, "and it takes me a while to readjust myself when I return to civilization."

I am sure his psychology is wrong, and that care and correctness in speech and in writing is more effective with even the untrained and illiterate than is slovenly, careless, ungrammatical English. The neatest, tidiest letter is always the best one, no matter who receives it.

In general all business letters are alike. They follow the same courteous dignified and impersonal tone. They are cast in the same mechanical form, they employ the same sort of stationery. As to the last, the better the quality and the more conservative the appearance the more effective it is. Cheap, flashy stationery advertises the writer himself as cheap and second-class. There are, however, certain types of business letters which are entitled to a separate and specific treatment.

There is the letter of recommendation. Any one can accumulate a collection of letters of recommendation, and I would almost venture the statement that he can get any one he pleases to write them. The most of such letters that I have been privileged to read say little and say it badly. A letter of recommendation should tell the truth. Ministers and school teachers, in my experience, write the worst ones and are most likely to show little respect for the principles of truth. They often injure rather than help the people whom they flagrantly praise by painting for them a character which it is impossible for even a saint in Heaven to live up to. When any one in a letter of recommendation tells more than the truth, he does the person recommended a real damage; even the truth that he tells is eventually discredited. Such a letter need not be confined wholly to words of praise. When we recommend men we are talking about human beings who, as nearly perfect as they may be, must still have some qualities which might be improved upon. One gives the strongest impression of sincerity when one mentions the weaknesses as well

as the strong points of a person about whom he is writing.

I recall that I won the everlasting enmity of a young fellow at one time who got hold of a letter I had written about him in which I had said that he "lacked aggressiveness." The young man argued that if he asked me to write about him I was under obligations to say only such things as would help him to get the position he desired or would be complimentary or creditable to him. If I could not say these things, he felt that I should not write at all. He was on the whole a good man, but he could not see that a frank truthful presentation of his qualities was more likely to help him along than a flattering untruthful description. Which leads me to say also that a letter of recommendation is the property of the man to whom it is addressed. It is in the nature of a confidential statement from the writer to the one written to. It is discourtesy and a breach of confidence to put it, without the consent of the writer, into the hands of the one about whom it is written.

When I have a man recommended to me I want to know something of his train-

ing, his age, his experience, his character. If he has specially attractive qualities or traits, if he has special talents, if he is possessed of idiosyncrasies, I am glad to be prepared for these. It ought to be possible to say something individual about any man, for no two of us are alike. "Mr. George Ward came to me directly from college and has been my secretary for three years," wrote a friend of mine. "He is not so diplomatic at all times as I should wish, but he is dependable, he is loyal, he is intelligent, and he likes to work. I have never given him any piece of work to do, no matter how difficult, that he did not do well. It will give me no discomfort if he is willing to stay with me." It was a good picture of an efficient man. Sometimes one is asked to recommend a man for a position for which he seems to have no qualifications. The only reasonable thing to do in such a case is to tell the man that from your point of view he is not suited for the job that he is wanting to fill and that you can not conscientiously recommend him. Such a course is the only way to be truthful and just to the employer and his prospective employee. It

takes courage to do it, but in the end it pays.

I believe I have written more letters of recommendation than any other man living of my age, because the college student and the college graduate are persistently looking for a job where references are required, and I have been a willing victim. Nearly every mail brings me in such requests, and yet I do not recall that many fellows have asked my permission to give my name as reference or have thanked me for the letter that I wrote. If you give a man as reference, the least you can do is to ask his permission beforehand or to announce to him what you have done, and if you ask him to write a letter for you, the minimum compensation you can offer him is to thank him.

Then there is the application for employment, the attempt to get a job by mail. It is a rather delicate matter to blow one's own horn effectively. There is always the danger of sounding too faint a note and of not being heard over the footlights; there is the opposite difficulty to avoid of turning on too much wind and of overdoing the job. How much to say

in one's own behalf and how much to omit calls for a rare judgment. I have often asked men who have come to me for letters of recommendation to write out what they honestly thought could be said in commendation of themselves; but I have seldom had anyone who did it well. One man only I recall who wrote a discriminating and satisfactory letter about himself that I would have been willing to sign my name to and send out in the mails.

Frankness is a good quality to reveal. If you have been well trained, if you have had some experience in the work which you are wanting to take up, if you are willing to work hard and to rest your advancement upon your ability to do the business, these are good things to say, and they are likely to make a fair impression upon the man who reads your letter. Most men who apply for a position offer little and ask a good deal. When you suggest, as they do in advertisements, that you are willing to rest your case upon your merits, that "the goods may be returned if not satisfactory," you reveal a certain confidence and belief in your own powers and ability that will be sure to make an

appeal. A reasonable confidence in yourself begets confidence on the part of others. If you have letters of recommendation it is well to enclose these, but it is better still to give references, since the letters that are enclosed, and which you have yourself seen, must of necessity be less frank and more guarded in their statements than one which is written directly to the employer concerned. Even though he tells the truth about you, the writer of a letter will do it in a very different way from what he would if he were sure you would never see the letter.

The mechanical construction of the letter which you write and its appearance will have much to do in determining your success in winning attention and getting a job. Good form, legible penmanship, correct spelling and sentence structure all have weight in settling your fate. I have known more than one appointment to turn upon a superfluous period or a misplaced comma or a misspelled word. These all seem trifles, but when the race is close, then the decision goes to the man whose attention to small details has been most punctilious. The same suggestions as I

have just given apply in a large degree to a reply to an advertisement for help. A good letter in this case is like a good front page in a newspaper or a pleasing personality in a first acquaintance.

There is another type of business letter which is so difficult to write courteously and in good temper that it usually proves too much for the inexperienced; that is the letter calling attention to an error and asking that it be corrected. There is usually the indication of annoyance in such a letter, and the imputation that, if the error was not intentional, it was at least the result of inexcusable carelessness. I recall a very distressing error which I made during the epidemic of influenza in 1918. It was my daily task among a thousand others to send letters and telegrams to the parents of our undergraduates who were seriously ill in order that the home folks should be kept informed as to their condition. Late one evening the head nurse at the hospital telephoned me that Robert Reed was seriously ill and that I should write his parents. I asked the office to look up Reed's home address and the name and address of his father, and I wrote

the letter. Then a few hours later I discovered that there were two Robert Reeds and that I had sent the disturbing letter to the wrong father. I hastily dispatched a telegram to the proper father and caught the other parents before they had time to get away from home. I had a letter from the first Mr. Reed in a few days which showed that he at least knew how gracefully to accept the correction of an error. He was so thankful, he said, to find by my second message that his son was quite well, that he willingly overlooked my mistake which he understood was, under the circumstances, quite an excusable one. I have always remembered him as one of the real gentlemen with whom I have had to do business.

One of the first things to keep in mind when a mistake has been made is that there is no likelihood of its having been intentionally made. Every one who makes mistakes soon learns that he pays a heavy price usually for his error, so that he would rather be right than not. Any right-minded business man is willing at once to make his mistakes good, and usually all that is necessary is to put the fact

before him pleasantly, and he will do the rest. Unless we have never ourselves made mistakes we should not fly into a rage when other people do so.

In the writing of any sort of business letter, and there are a great many special kinds which I have not mentioned, we should be helped in determining what line of procedure to follow if, for a moment, we attempted to put ourselves into the position of the man to whom we are writing. It is largely a matter of psychology, of trying to understand how men's minds work, how they are most easily affected, what appeals to them most. If we would study ourselves more carefully we should know better how to appeal to other men, for in a very large degree we are all alike.

# LETTERS OF COURTESY

## LETTERS OF COURTESY

When I was a young fellow, just starting out into life, I came into daily contact with a man who had had a considerable experience with all sorts of people as a professional man and as a politician. He was shrewd, business-like, and, by those who did not know him very well, was considered cold and calculating—a man who would not be likely to do anything for a purely emotional reason; and yet from him I learned the effectiveness and influence of the letter of courtesy. I mean by this phrase the letter written not in reply to another letter nor yet to elicit a reply of any sort, but simply as an act of politeness and thoughtfulness to acknowledge a kindness or an obligation or to let one's friends or acquaintances know that one was aware of their sorrows and their successes, of their comings and goings, and that one had a real personal interest in these. It is the sort of letter that one is seldom under obligations to write, but if it is written at all it must be done at the opportune moment. Dawson never seemed to let a chance go by to write such a letter. If a

friend of his was elected to office or received any recognition or promotion for efficient service Dawson was the first to acknowledge the fact with a letter of congratulation. Marriages and births and anniversaries of all sorts never went unnoticed by him. It made little difference who the person concerned was; he might be the leading citizen or the son of a wash woman, but if he were in trouble, or had accomplished something creditable, or was in any way in the public eye, he was sure to get a line from Dawson written with his own hand on the beautiful stationery in the green ink which was with him a fad in correspondence.

When Ralph Roberts lost his life in a railroad accident, though Dawson was a thousand miles away and had really known the boy very slightly, he was the first to write the family and to express his sorrow at the son's unfortunate death; and I recall with what pride the father showed the letter to his friends and what comfort it brought to the broken mother. When George Mills won the two-mile race at the Western Conference Meet, Dawson was the first man to see the notice in a New

York paper and to write George a letter which gave him the greatest delight, and which he will keep among his treasures as long as he lives. I used to wonder often how he found time to do it, but when I spoke to him about the matter he said, "A man can always find time to do what he really wants to do, and nothing I do gives me more pleasure and satisfaction and influence, I suppose, than to write these letters. They bind me to the friends I have, and I know they make more friends for me."

Few of these letters were ever answered, for the letter of courtesy is the sort that people are glad to receive, that they intend to acknowledge, but seldom do. It took me a long time to reconcile these two facts. When I began to follow Dawson's example and write letters of congratulation and sympathy and encouragement to my friends I was disappointed when they did not reply and was about to conclude that the letters gave little pleasure and the effort of writing them was not worth while. One day a stranger from a little town a hundred miles or so away dropped into my office on a matter of business.

"I have heard a good deal about you," he said, "from a young fellow in my town by the name of Wrenn."

"What does Jennie have to say about me?" I asked, curious as we all are when our names are mentioned, and trying to recall what I had done to Wrenn.

"Well, you wrote him a letter once when he knocked a home run or won a foot race, or something of that sort, when he was in college, and he never tires of talking about you and of showing the letter to people in the town; and he says he wouldn't take a hundred dollars for it."

The boy had never indicated to me that my letter had brought him any pleasure. I would willingly write another for half of what he says he considers the first one worth, but I determined if such a little thing as writing a letter would bring a boy pleasure through so many years, I should continue the practice.

Another friend of mine, who has learned the importance and the possibilities of this sort of letter-writing, keeps his writing materials at hand in his study and makes it a point almost every morning before he goes to his office to write a

friendly or a complimentary note or two. If he has talked to a discouraged boy the day previous he tries to brace him up; if he has seen a loafer, he endeavors to stimulate him, and wherever he recognizes an opportunity for giving pleasure or comfort or helpful advice he seizes it and writes the effective word. He realizes, as not all of us have come to do, that the written word is more permanent in its effects than is the spoken word, for what is spoken we may forget when the sound is out of our ears, but whatever is written may be recalled to our memory at will.

I receive every Christmas a great many remembrances from the people I have met in various parts of the world, from the students whom, during the last twenty-five years, I have taught in the University, from young people whom I have encouraged or advised or disciplined or helped in some way, but I receive nothing that gives me so much pleasure as the unsolicited friendly note that stirs recollections and brings good wishes. And it is such an easy thing to write.

Lincoln knew the importance of such a letter, and he knew how to write it when

occasion demanded. His letter to Mrs. Bixby is one of the most dignified as well as tenderest in the English language.

Dear Madam:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Some letters of courtesy we are under obligations to write. A friend whom I

met yesterday in an unfamiliar city took me out to his house to dinner and spent half the afternoon in contributing to my comfort and pleasure. I should be crude indeed if when I arrived home I did not send him a note of thanks for his unselfish kindness. A group of young fellows sent me a box of flowers when I was ill a short time ago; I should be classed among the heathen and the barbarians if I did not, as soon as I was able, make some written acknowledgment of their thoughtfulness. Any personal attention or courtesy which we are shown, any special obligation which we may incur, we may well recognize and acknowledge in writing. If a friend gets us out of a hole or goes bail for us when we are in jail, the least we can do to show our gratitude is to thank him; and yet, as I now recall it, the last young fellow I saved from jail gave me the impression that he was doing me a personal favor by allowing me to assume the responsibility. I have heard from his parents, but from him I have never had a line. Too often this is the case, but it is really the man who neglects to write who in the end is the sufferer.

"I wonder if Fred will write us?" I queried one morning after a recent guest had left us. He was no special friend of ours, but we had taken him in and looked after him for a week when he was stopping in our town. He had had a good bed and better meals than I am accustomed to have when we are not entertaining company. He had sat by our cheerful open fire in the evenings and had his breakfast served in the morning when it pleased him to come down.

"Probably not," my wife answered, "they usually don't, and, besides, Fred is young and selfish."

I knew that he meant to write; I knew equally well that he knew he ought to write; but he didn't do it. We never had a word from him. I met him on the street a year later when I was in Kansas City.

"I shall never forget that good time you gave me when I was at your house a year ago," he said, "I meant to write to you, but—" It was the conventional reason, and I said nothing in reply.

Why don't people do it? As I have suggested in another chapter, some are ignorant, they have never been taught at

home or in the schools just how such things should be handled. Others are lazy and selfish. They have got out of the incident all of the personal pleasure or profit available, and they see no particular reason why they should put themselves to any trouble to acknowledge the courtesy or to give the other fellow pleasure. They are like the young man to whom I lent fifty dollars a few months ago to get him out of a financial embarrassment. He returned it long after the time agreed upon with the statement, "Well, here's your money; and if you knew how nearly I came to not paying it at all you'd think yourself lucky to get it." There was no gratitude on his part; he was rather disgruntled because he was expected to keep his obligation at all. There are those who procrastinate until the time is past when it is opportune to write such a note; and some have no facility in composition; they are so self-conscious and inexperienced as not to know just what to say, so they say nothing.

Such notes should always be informal; they are friendly and personal, and they should take on a friendly personal exte-

rior. This means that they should be written in longhand whenever time and circumstances will at all permit. The typewritten note inevitably suggests the turning out of quantities of notes of a similar character. I remember at a time of little leisure a few years ago dictating some personal notes to undergraduates whose excellent scholastic standing had warranted recognition. It was a case of doing it in this way or not doing it at all.

"I want to thank you," one of the men wrote me in acknowledging the note, "for the letter of congratulation which I received. Notwithstanding the fact that the writing of such notes is probably a matter of regular routine taken care of by the clerks in your office, yet I am pleased to be included in one of a small group which is worthy of special recognition."

He saw nothing personal or individual in my typewritten letter, though it was different from those sent to the other men, and I was not sure that I could blame him for so thinking. He saw it only as a form letter sent out whenever occasion warranted. I should have found time to write it by hand as I have since tried to do.

In other respects also the earmarks of a business letter should be eliminated in the note of courtesy. One of two forms may be used—a form used commonly in informal military correspondence or a still more informal form. The two illustrations below will make clear what I mean.

5449 Greenwood Avenue,
Chicago, Illinois,
March 17, 1921.

Dear Frank:

This morning's *Tribune* contained the announcement that you have just been made a member of the firm for which you have been working since you left college. This is a quick recognition of your worth, and I am sure shows that you have been as attentive to duty since you got out of college as you were while an undergraduate. I congratulate you and the firm that has been lucky enough to get you. I am sure that what you have done in the past is a true indication of what you will accomplish in the future.

Sincerely yours,

JOHN WATSON

To
Mr. Frank Turner,
Ancona, Illinois.

Usually in such a note as I have given above the street address is engraved upon the stationery and only the date need be written in; sometimes only the initials of the writer form a monogram at the top of the sheet. The writer's taste determines this. The second form of note omits the date and the written address at the beginning and starts with the complimentary introduction.

Dear Mrs. Bryan:

The announcement of Robert's death was a great shock to all of us and filled us with sorrow and regret. Mr. Stewart and I recall with pleasure our intimate relations with him last summer at Estes Park. There never was a more unselfish boy nor one who made friends more quickly. No one who knew him will ever forget him. There is little I can say to comfort you in his loss. You have, however, the sweet memory of a thoughtful, loving son, and the assurance of the deepest sympathy of his friends and yours.

Sincerely yours,

SILVIA BLACK STEWART

Elgin, Illinois,
April 2, 1920.

The opportunities for writing such letters are infinite and are limited only by one's time and inclination. If the tenor at church on Sunday morning sings an unusually appealing solo, if the minister's sermon goes home more directly than ordinarily, it is worth while to write them to that effect. When our friends have prospered, or accomplished something worth while, or have suffered reverses or experienced sorrow, it is quite fitting that we should recognize these facts. Joy and sorrow, success or failure, progress or decline—we share all of these things with our friends. Our joys are increased or our sorrows lessened as we recognize the fact that our friends know of them and care. We can often send a letter when it would be impossible or undesirable for us to say what we have in mind, and the letter is more permanent in its effects than the spoken words which we might utter. The sad truth is that most of us pat ourselves approvingly upon the back when we are discriminating enough to discover a weakness in what we have seen or heard. When there is something which can be criticized adversely or found fault with we jump at

it with alacrity, but when we meet something worthy of praise, we say nothing.

"I worked for a man fifteen years," a friend of mine said to me not long ago, "and I am sure I did good work. My employer would have admitted it had he been asked. Every few days during the time of my connection with him he pointed out to me my shortcomings and my mistakes, but only once during the entire time did he give me a word of praise or commendation. I came to know that if he said nothing he approved; if he could not approve I heard from him in no uncertain terms." It is a habit we have, even in our correspondence, of sending our flowers after our friends are dead. If we would only look around, if we were willing unselfishly to take the trouble, there are almost daily opportunities where these epistolary flowers might give encouragement and comfort and happiness to those who are still alive.

The effect of such letters upon those who receive them is not their only effect. Indirectly they influence the happiness and the success of the writer. First of all they bring him more friends, and help him

to hold those he already has. "If one would have friends, he must show himself friendly," is the substance of Bacon's statement, and its truth can be proved in the experience of all of us. Few of us have more friends than we need, and we can well afford to hold on to our present list and to develop as many new ones as possible. It takes a very little thing sometimes either to cement or to break a friendship that has no very strong bonds.

It is a good business proposition even if one is doing the thing from a purely selfish motive to write these letters of courtesy, for there is in it a personal touch that cannot help but make its appeal. Many of our everyday business deals are finally settled upon purely personal grounds. There are a half dozen stores in town which sell men's clothing, and there is little if any difference in the character of the goods they display. I do business with the one with whose proprietor I have the most intimate personal relations, the one who has shown me the most personal kindness, and who gives me the most careful personal attention. I am appealed to quite as much by the relationships which

have developed between us outside of his store as by those which are shown at the particular moment of doing business. The fact that he sends me a lithographed postal card when he is at Palm Beach or writes me a letter of congratulations on my birthday induces me indirectly to get a new spring suit at his establishment, and I do not believe that he intends this result at all when he takes the time to write me. But it is an evidence of good salesmanship whether it is practiced by the minister or the milkman. It develops one's sympathies, it widens one's interests, it robs one of selfishness and cultivates in one some of the social graces which might otherwise be lacking. It is a sort of humanizer, a broadening, refining influence which is good for every man.

These letters should not be long; they require no literary skill to make them effective. They should be direct, sincere, genuine; they should come from the heart; nothing would show so quickly as hypocrisy; nothing would be so ineffective as to overdo or exaggerate the feeling or the sentiments or the emotions expressed. The writer should say what he feels and feel

what he says. Unless he is genuinely himself, he will have failed.

A wealthy friend of mine was written a few years ago by a minister who wished to induce the capitalist to give a certain sum of money toward the building of a church. My friend refused at first, but afterward made the gift through another channel. "Why did you refuse to give the money to Mr. Andrews?" I asked him one day, with some curiosity to understand his viewpoint. "The man tried to flatter me," was his reply. "He was not sincere; in order to influence me, he said things that were not true. I enjoy flattery, as every man does; but to be effective it must be skilfully done, and his work was crude."

I have lately been sending to a little girl of my acquaintance—she is nine years old, I think—the foreign stamps which correspondence brings to me. She is making a collection, and not infrequently I find one that she does not possess. It is very little trouble to me to slip the stamps into an envelope and address it to her. She wrote me a short time ago a very correct and a very proper letter for a young woman of

her age, or of any age for that matter, to write to a married man. It paid me a thousand times over for the effort it caused her to write the note, and besides, it gave her training in thoughtfulness and courtesy. I reproduce the letter here for the benefit of those who have had no experience and no training in this sort of correspondence and who may be induced themselves to try it some time in the future:

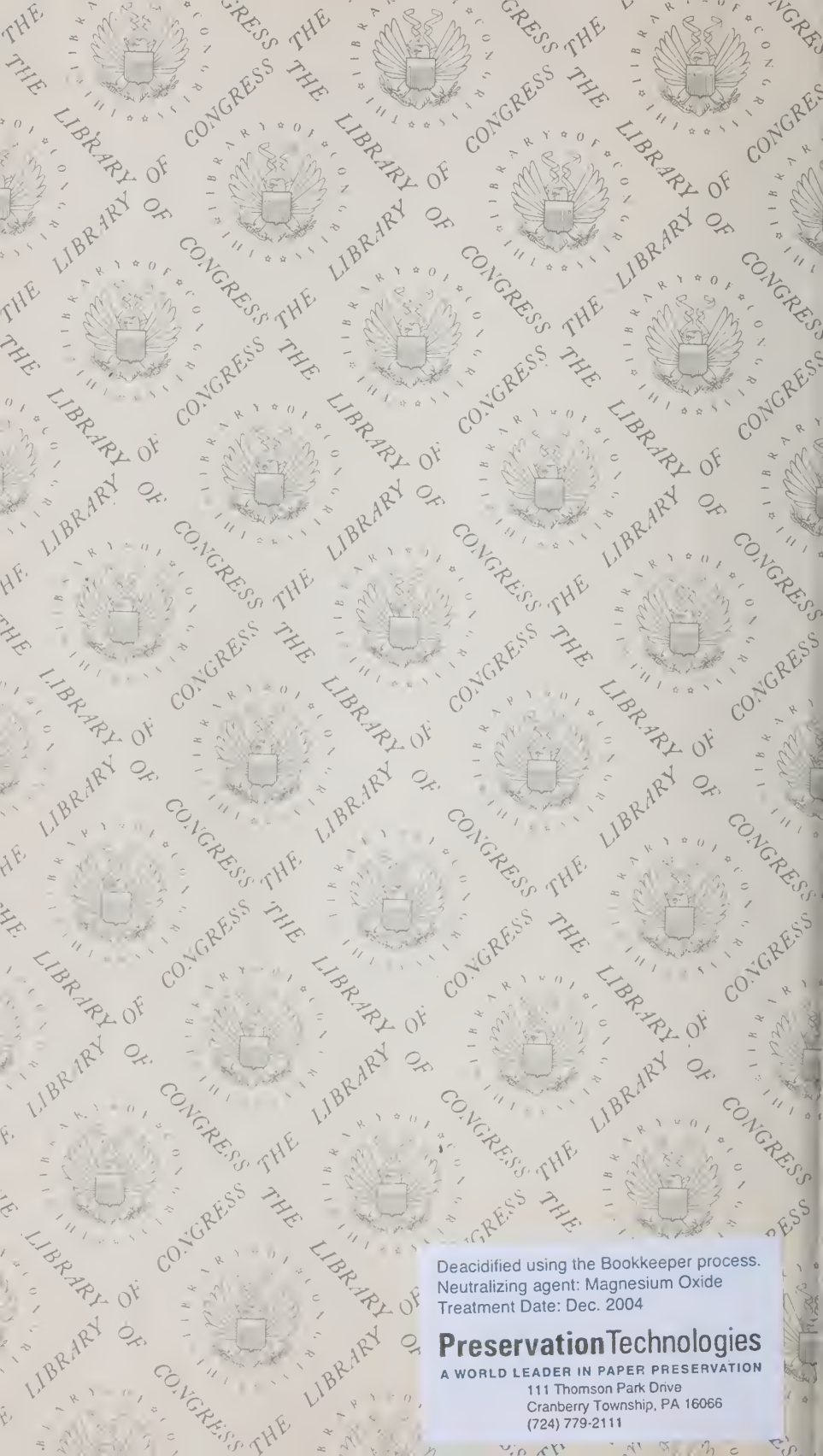
Urbana, Illinois,
March 9, 1921.

My dear Mr. Clark:

I want to thank you for the foreign stamps which you sent me. There were a number of them that we did not have in our collection. It was very good of you to take the trouble to send them.

Yours sincerely,
MARGARET CARNAHAN.

There is no other form of letter-writing that seems to me to hold so many possibilities, and there is no other form so little used. I commend it to you.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